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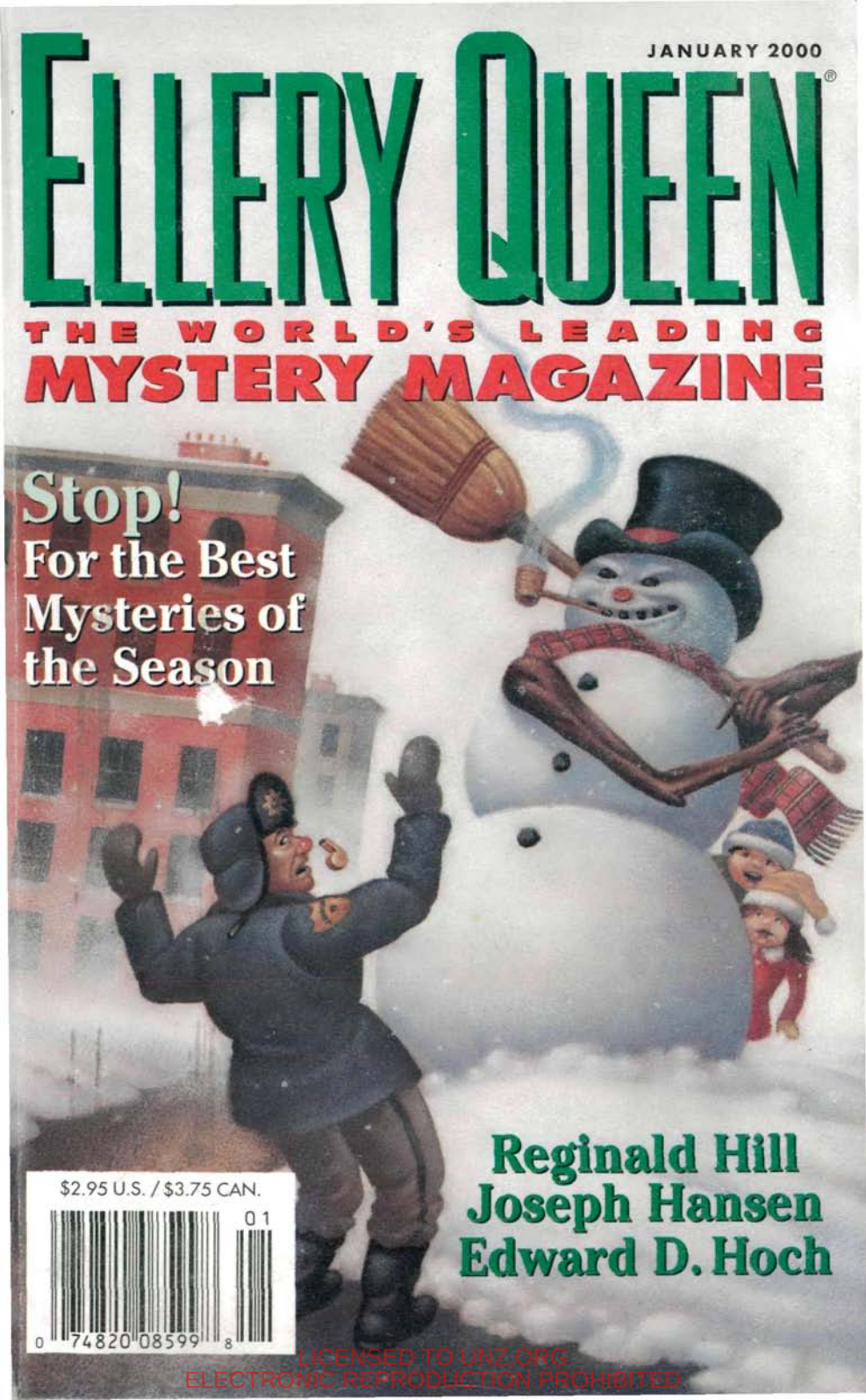

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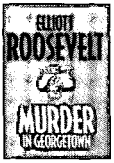

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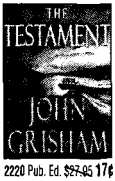

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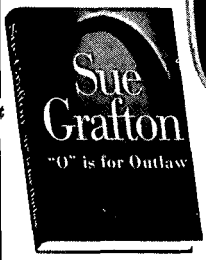

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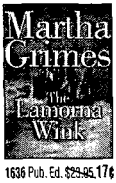

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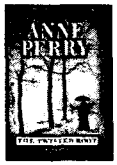

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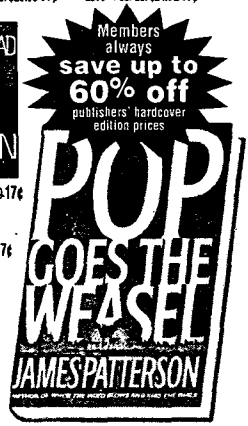

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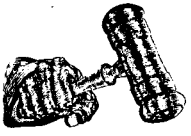

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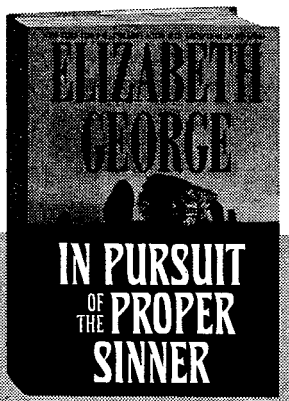

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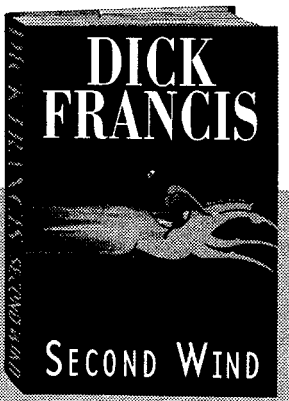

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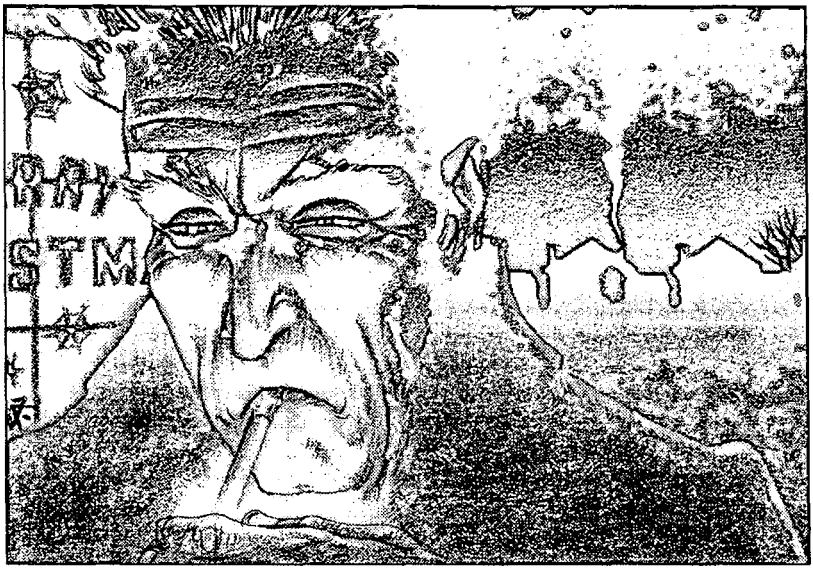

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A Candle for Christmas

by Reginald Hill

1.

"December twenty-fourth, nineteen ninety-eight. Ten fifty-seven A.M. Interview of Mrs. Angela Fraser. Present, Ms. Juliet Dacre, solicitor; Detective Superintendent Andrew Dalziel; Woman Police Constable Deirdre Collingdale; and myself, Detective Chief Inspector Peter Pascoe.

"Mrs. Fraser, I should remind you that you are under caution."

He was seated directly opposite Mrs. Fraser, with Dalziel facing the solicitor. WPC Collingwood was seated behind her colleagues and slightly to one side. Pascoe glanced round at her and gave her a reassuring smile. Poor kid, nineteen years old, eighteen months in the job, recently engaged, and probably looking forward to heading home at the end of her shift to a merry little Christmas

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with her fiancé and family. Then fate in the irresistible form of Andy Dalziel had volunteered her as token female presence at what promised to be a harrowing interview. No wonder she looked pale and unhappy.

But she was the picture of health compared with Angela Fraser, a small, plumping woman in her early forties, though with thirty years pared off her face by the cosmetic of stress, which had pallored her cheeks and darkened her eyes to a waiflike mask. Her fingers, patched with burn dressings like a flaking mummy, picked restlessly at the small gold crucifix round her neck.

In 1995, Reginald Hill was awarded Britain's Crime Writers Association's highest honor, the Diamond Dagger, for his outstanding contribution to the crime and mystery genre. Much of Mr. Hill's work in the field revolves around his characters Dalziel and Pascoe, the police detectives featured in this new story. The dozen-plus novels in which the duo appear are witty and cleverly plotted; for a review of the latest see Jon Breen's column (p.37). ✝

Next to her Juliet Dacre was doodling with a pencil in a leather-bound notebook. She was in her late twenties, with the kind of bright bouffant hair, pneumatic figure, and vacuously pretty face which would have got her the role of dumb blonde in any of the old Hollywood comedies.

Pascoe was not fooled. He and Jools Dacre were long acquainted and he knew all her ways.

Opposite her, Andy Dalziel was scratching the furrow under one of his chins like a JCB excavating a drainage ditch, at the same time studying the contents of a box file with all the intensity of a medieval scholar. Pascoe could see that it contained a meat pie and a copy of the sports section of the local paper.

The silence had stretched long enough now for small and distant sounds to make their presence felt. The low hiss of the tape; the occasional bubble of the radiator; a door banging; a faraway laugh; a gusting wind hitting the one high window and bringing with it faint snatches of "Once in Royal David's City"; the Sally Army Band playing in the shopping precinct a quarter of a mile away.

How sad the slug-horn's call, deep in the forest glades, thought Pascoe. And sadder still for this woman, bringing with it echoes of normal everyday life where last-minute shoppers scuttled around to lay down essential supplies against the long siege of Christmas.

The emergent noises only increased the tension in the room, like the last shufflings and coughings prefacing the moment when the conductor raises his baton. But Pascoe made no move. It was

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Tubby the Tuba who signaled the kickoff in this particular ensemble, which since his last promotion did not perform together all that often. Supers and DCI's rarely teamed up for interviews. It took something special to conjure such a coruscation of brass.

Setting fire to a policeman was something special.

A strong blast of wind hit the window with what sounded like sleet in it. The band was into "Angels From the Realms of Glory" now. He should have been out there shopping with Ellie. When he'd wangled both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day off, it had seemed like a seasonal miracle. But while only God in Heaven has power to perform miracles, His agent in Mid-Yorkshire has authority to cancel them.

When the phone had rung, Ellie had glared at him with precognitive fury.

"Tell him to sod off," she'd said. "And if he tries to give you orders, tell him to stick them up his bum if he can reach round that far."

But Dalziel had not been in commanding mood. Incredibly, he'd used the P-word.

"I'd appreciate your support in this one, Pete. *Please.*"

Which in itself would probably have been enough to ensure Pascoe's presence.

But there'd been something else. Ellie was not the only one who got these flashes of foresight. Last night Pascoe had gone to the Plods' Party, Uniformed Branch's seasonal thrash in the Police Social Club. Not really his kind of thing, but it didn't do to look standoffish, especially if you'd got a degree and still opened doors for ladies. So he'd put in a token appearance. Well, maybe a bit more than *token,* as every time he made a move for the exit, Fat Andy, like a punch-drunk bouncer with a limited grasp of his duties, was standing there smiling to prevent him from leaving.

Finally he'd called a taxi and used its imminent arrival as his escape clause. The Fat Man had followed him outside. As they stood there in the chill night air, a man of about forty with a cigarette dangling from his lips opened the door behind them. He was muscularly lean with black unruly hair and the kind of long craggy features Pascoe associated with sexily taciturn sheep drovers in Australian movies. He recognised him as Sergeant Joe Fraser, officer in charge of the Ridley substation about twenty miles away. Pascoe didn't know him all that well, but the Fat Man greeted him like an old friend.

"Smokey, what fettle? Don't see much of you since you got exiled out among the yokels."

"Can still see a hell of a lot of you, Andy. You're looking well, or the whisky's looking well in you."

"Fat" jokes. A real old friend.

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Dalziel said, "You're not shogging off too, are you, Smokey? By God, what's happening to the world? I can remember do's when you and me were the only ones left standing."

"Aye, likely 'cos I were holding you up," said the saturnine Fraser. "But none of us have got any younger."

"Hold on," said Dalziel, stepping close and sniffing. "Here, you've been drinking. You're not fit to drive. You'd best come back in and have another!"

Somehow when the Fat Man said things like this, they sounded almost rational.

Fraser shook his head, flicked his cigarette to the pavement and ground it out.

"Think I'll just walk a bit to clear me head, then I'll get a taxi. Have yourself a merry little Christmas, Andy."

The man started to walk away.

Dalziel called after him, "Not getting religion, are you, Joe? They say it's like malaria—once you've had it, you never get shut of it."

Fraser paused and turned. Muzzily silhouetted against the light filtering out of one of the club windows, he presented a dark, menacing figure. He had, Pascoe now recalled, a bit of a reputation as a hard man: hard drinking, hard smoking, hard playing, and hardheaded in his attitude to crime and criminals. In fact, very much Andy Dalziel's kind of cop.

Fraser pulled another cigarette out of a battered gunmetal case and lit it with an old-fashioned petrol lighter made out of a cartridge case. The wavering flame ran light across his face like sunbreaks across an alien landscape. To Pascoe, his spikey hair seemed touched with a phosphorescent glow and his skin with a corpse's pallor.

"Careful what you say, Andy. Never know who's listening at this time of year. But don't worry, I'll light you a candle for Christmas."

Then he snapped the lighter shut, extinguishing (or so it seemed to Pascoe) himself with the flame, and in that moment he knew with a certainty beyond reason that he would never see Sergeant Fraser in this life again.

Then Dalziel called rather plaintively, "Need to make it a big one, Joe," and the moment was past.

"Known each other a long time, have you, sir?" he asked.

"Aye. Me and Smokey Joe go way back. Golden days, lad, golden days."

He spoke with such affection Pascoe was surprised by a pang of what he hoped wasn't jealousy. As he rode away in his taxi, it occurred to him that he could have invited Fraser to share it. The road out to Ridley passed through his suburb. He peered out of the

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window but couldn't spot the man. He felt rather relieved. It would have been too much like inviting a corpse to climb into its own hearse.

The macabre fancy had made him smile, a smile he'd recalled this morning when he got Dalziel's phone call.

"Superintendent. *Superintendent!* Don't you think it's time we made a start?"

Pascoe was jerked back to here and now by Jools Dacre's voice, edged with irritation.

Dalziel looked up, blinked, yawned, then said, "Aye, what's the holdup, Chief Inspector? Let's get on with it."

Pascoe said, "Of course. Mrs. Fraser, for the record, would you confirm that you are Mrs. Angela Fraser of Twenty-four Latimer Grove, Ridley, Mid-Yorkshire?"

"Yes."

Her voice was low and smoke-roughened, but the tape needle confirmed it was being picked up.

He went on, "Mrs. Fraser, a woman telephoned the emergency services at six-eleven A.M. this morning to report a fire at Twenty-four Latimer Grove. Can you confirm it was you?"

"Yes."

"The call was recorded. Ms. Dacre, you've had a chance to look at the transcript?"

Jools Dacre said, "Yes, though I should like to hear the tape itself. Often there are considerations of stress and intonation which the written word cannot indicate."

She accompanied the words with an apologetic smile. Pascoe's answering smile was mouth-deep. Letting Dacre's sweetness-and-light manner relax you was like binning your brolly just because you saw a bit of blue sky on an April morning.

He resumed, "On the tape you say, *Please come quickly. There's been a dreadful accident. I think my husband's dead. It's all my fault.* Do you remember this?"

"Yes."

"The fire brigade arrived at six thirty-six A.M. and an ambulance shortly afterwards. You were given first-aid treatment but refused to leave the scene until the fire officers had recovered your husband's body. When he was brought out, you are reported by fire officers and paramedics as saying, *Is he dead? Oh my God. It's my fault. I killed him.*"

Jools Dacre was at it with the apologetic smile again.

"Forgive me, Mr. Pascoe, but Mrs. Fraser is making no effort to deny her sense of responsibility for the tragic death of her husband. In view of which, do we need to plough through all this painful detail? Is it really germane?"

Dalziel's head came up from the file.

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"Germaine?" he said. "I thought her name were Angela."

Pascoe winced and said, "I think Ms. Dacre means, germane to our enquiries."

"Oh. *That* germane," said Dalziel. And resumed his reading.

Pascoe had no objection to the Fat Man winding up lawyers, but he felt that this heavy-footed mockery was not only bad taste but bad technique.

No two ways about it, it was a mistake for Dalziel to be here. Last night Pascoe'd got a whiff of how close Dalziel and Fraser were, and when he'd arrived at the station that morning, he'd found a grieving Fat Man readier to lead a lynch mob than an investigation.

"Where's Mrs. Fraser now?" Pacoe had asked.

"Cow's in hospital. Too ill to talk except to her brief. Know who it is? Bloody Dacre!"

"Jools Dacre? In that case, sir, we'd better go into this very softly, sir."

"Softly?" Dalziel's face was working like a cauldron of porridge. "After that murdering bitch put a torch to her man in his bed and burnt him to death?"

"We don't know what happened, sir. Not till we talk to Mrs. Fraser."

"We know what she said on the emergency tape and we know her brief's that bitch from VIM, so I reckon I could write you a pretty fair script. *Domestic violence. Provocation.* Bitch!"

VIM stood for Violence In Marriage, a high-profile Yorkshire-based support group. Pascoe knew a lot about it. His wife was a founder member. And Juliet Dacre was its legal adviser.

Pascoe said, "Have we got anything from the fire department yet?"

"No. The bedroom was so badly damaged, they're afraid the whole bungalow roof might collapse in, so they're messing around making it safe. But I'll bet your pension on what they'll find."

"You may be right, sir," said Pascoe gently. "Look, I can see how much Sergeant Fraser meant to you, but I really think you should step away from this one. You know how easy it is to spook the CPS in cases like this."

The argument seemed to work. Dalziel relaxed and said gloomily, "Aye, bunch of girls' blouses! Why do you think I got you in to take over? With Pious Peter in the pulpit, no one's going to query the hymn sheet. Get to it, lad."

So Pascoe had got to it. Enquiries at the hospital as to when Mrs. Fraser would be fit to be interviewed had brought Jools Dacre to the phone.

"Peter, you're in charge? That's great. Listen, Angela's so keen to get this dreadful business sorted, she insists on discharging

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herself and coming down to the station to make a statement. We should be there in an hour. I'm sure you'll agree that in the circs we ought to keep it short and sweet. Is that all right?"

Pascoe, who knew that few people managed to insist on doing anything Jools Dacre didn't want them to do, said carefully, "You are, of course, aware that in the light of Mrs. Fraser's admissions, she will be undergoing a formal interview as a criminal suspect."

"Yes, I know we've got to go through the formalities. Isn't it a bind? But best for all parties in the long run, of course. Ciao!"

When he'd told Dalziel, the Fat Man had rubbed his hands.

"Grand! Sticking her head into the lion's mouth, is she? Well, let's see if we can't bite it right off."

"We? I'll be conducting the interview, sir," said Pascoe coldly.

"Of course you will, lad. That's why you're here, isn't it? To make sure it's all done by the book. I'll just sit so quiet you'll think I've snuffed it."

And I'm to be Queen of the May, Mother, thought Pascoe.

For the first time in his life he wished he was in a crowded department store, laden with bags, debating with Ellie whether they should get Rosie the Rollerblades she'd been dropping large hints about for weeks.

He said, "We will, of course, show Mrs. Fraser every consideration, but we have to get to the facts."

Jools Dacre said, "So long as we don't lose sight of the fact that she is here of her own volition, against medical advice, and still suffering from the shock of Sergeant Fraser's death and the injuries she sustained in her efforts to rescue him."

There was a snort from the Fat Man which a deaf man in a storm might have mistaken for a repressed sneeze.

Pascoe said, "Of course. Meanwhile, if you could give us your account of what actually happened, Mrs. Fraser . . . "

Angela Fraser took a deep breath. One hand went to her throat, perhaps to touch the crucifix, perhaps in anticipation of pain. She took a long drink of water, then started speaking in a low, monotonous voice.

"Joe said he had to go into headquarters yesterday afternoon and he'd probably look in at the club later on as it was the Christmas party. I knew what that meant. . . . "

"What, precisely?" urged Pascoe when she fell silent.

"It meant he'd be back heaven knows when with a bellyful of booze," said the woman wearily. "I said I hoped he'd not be driving, and he said he'd get a lift in and a taxi back. It was about two o'clock when he got home. I'd been watching the telly and must have fallen asleep. I always sit up when Joe's out late. . . . "

"Like any concerned little wife, eh?" muttered Dalziel from the depths of his file.

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"No!" lashed Angela Fraser with a sudden startling intensity. "Like someone who's learned from long and hard experience not to be caught lying helpless when Joe Fraser comes home full of drink!"

Dalziel yawned so noisily it set the tape needle flickering.

Pascoe said quickly, "Could you explain that, please?"

She glanced at her solicitor, who nodded encouragingly.

"He knocked me around. He didn't have to be drunk to do it, but when he was drunk, he didn't seem to be able to help it."

"And was this how he behaved when he got home?" said Pascoe.

"Not to start with. When he came in, he was fairly quiet, subdued almost, like he'd got something on his mind. I thought it might be going to be all right and I made him some coffee, but when I gave it to him, he yelled, 'You know I like it black, you stupid cow,' and sent the cup flying across the room. I said 'Please, Joe, it's the best china,' and he yelled it was him that paid for it and he could do what he liked with what was his. And then he started smashing things up."

She paused. After a few seconds Pascoe said gently, "And what did you do then, Mrs. Fraser?"

"I sat quiet till he'd finished. Then I went to the kitchen to get a brush and pan to clear the mess. When I came back in he'd got a litre of scotch out of the sideboard and he was drinking it straight out of the bottle."

This was too much for Dalziel.

He said incredulously, "Your husband's drunk and dangerous and smashing up your home, and all you do is start clearing up the mess?"

Dacre said, "Is that a question, Mr. Dalziel?"

"No," he said. "It's a bloody mystery."

Dacre smiled, glanced at the recording machine, and made a note. She's lapping this up, thought Pascoe. I've got to get the fat sod out of here. He said, "What happened then?"

"He told me to stop the racket, so I put the pan down and sat opposite him. I hoped he would fall asleep but suddenly he said, 'Come here.' And I knew it was going to start."

"What?"

"The pain. He grabbed my arm and forced it up my back till I nearly fainted. Then he started beating me."

She was back to her level monotonous tone.

Dalziel said, "Hang about. You say he's done this before?"

"Many times. Over many years. For as long as I can remember."

"So you're married to a sadistic bastard who's been giving you hell for years and you just put up with it? Why not walk out? Why not make a complaint? Why not do *anything?*"

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Jools Dacre said sharply, "Please don't hector my client, Superintendent."

"Hector? He's not involved, is he?"

Suddenly Angela Fraser broke out passionately, "I didn't walk out because I'd nowhere to go, and I didn't make a complaint because I'd only the police to complain to, and he was always sorry after he'd done it and he always said it wouldn't happen again, and I always wanted to believe he meant it and I think he really did, I think he really loved me and he couldn't help it. . . . "

She looked on the point of breaking into tears but when the sobbing started it came from the wrong direction.

Pascoe turned to see WPC Collingwood's face rubbery with emotion.

Mrs. Fraser said, "Oh, Deirdre, I'm sorry, love . . . I don't know why they had to have you in here . . ."

Tears streaming down her face, the young constable stood up and rushed out of the room.

Pascoe, amazed, said, "Deirdre? You know PC Collingwood?"

"Oh yes. When she was attached to the substation as a probationer, she came round to the house a lot . . . she was like a daughter to us . . . we never had children . . . maybe if we had . . ."

And now she too was out of control. She collapsed across the table, her whole body racked with sobs.

Jools Dacre put her arms around her and cried angrily, "What the hell's going on here?"

Dalziel said, "Think it might be a good time to suspend the interview, lad."

Ten minutes later, Mrs. Fraser was on her way back to hospital with Dacre spitting Parthian threats of official complaint. Angrily, Pascoe went looking for the Fat Man and found him in his room feeding coffee and presumably comfort to Deirdre Collingwood. When he saw Pascoe, he made a sternly reproving face like a *Carry On* matron and came to the door.

"Show a bit of tact, lad. The girl's upset," he whispered.

"I can believe it," hissed Pascoe. "You knew she was a friend of the family, didn't you? And you thought it would be clever to use her to put extra pressure on Mrs. Fraser. Well, all you've done is compromise the whole investigation, that and your stupid interruptions."

"Oh aye? And what am I interrupting? I've been at livelier prayer meetings. That bitch is laughing at you, lad. Laughing!"

"If you know something about Mrs. Fraser I don't, shouldn't you be telling me, sir?"

"I know she messed Joe's head up. Sex every four years—she thought that's what leap year meant. No divorce 'cos she's a good

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Catholic. And if he tried to leave her, she'd top herself the day he went!"

"Really? In case you haven't noticed, it's Sergeant Fraser who's dead," said Pascoe.

For a second he thought Dalziel was going to hit him.

Then the Fat Man said wearily, "I think you'd best take the rest of the day off, lad, and try to get your head round where your loyalties lie. I'll let you know when you'll be needed again."

And he closed the door in Pascoe's face.

Early that evening, Pascoe and Ellie were setting out presents under their Christmas tree. On the sofa, their daughter Rosie lay asleep, her resolution to stay awake all Christmas eroded by sheer fatigue.

"You decided against the Rollerblades then?" murmured Pascoe neutrally.

"Yes. I really don't think they're safe," said Ellie defensively. "I took a vote and as you weren't there, I won. Peter, he won't muck up Christmas Day as well, will he?"

"God knows. Mrs. Fraser certainly looked like she'd be better off in a hospital bed."

"That poor woman. I almost wish I was religious, then I could say a prayer for her."

Pascoe smiled at her fondly. Sometimes her logic reminded him of Fat Andy's.

"I'll see she gets a fair crack. No harm in lighting a candle for her, though."

"You reckon?"

Ellie struck a match and set its flame to the candles under a set of angel chimes. The circling angels gathered speed and sent up their gentle chiming. On the sofa, Rosie rubbed her eyes and said sleepily, "Why do you light a candle for people?"

"You been earwigging?" said Pascoe. "To keep them from harm, I think."

"And does it really work?"

"Why wouldn't it?" He picked her up and swung her high as the star on the tree. Fat Andy and Jools Dacre and the sad tragic Frasers seemed light-years away.

The phone rang.

He set his daughter down and picked up the receiver.

It was the Fat Man, gloatingly jolly.

"Pete, lad, over your sulk yet? Good. Listen, great news. I've got the fire report. Definite use of petrol. And there's better still. They found a jerrycan in the kitchen and it's got our Angela's prints all over it. So we've got the bitch! But don't worry. Hospital says they

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want to keep her in tomorrow so you can enjoy your turkey and stuffing. See you Boxing Day. Merry Christmas."

Slowly Pascoe replaced the receiver. Alongside it the angel chimes spun faster and faster, filling the air with music. "Merry Christmas," he said.

2.

"December twenty-sixth, nineteen ninety-eight. Eleven thirty-five A.M. Interview of Mrs. Angela Fraser resumes. Present Ms. Juliet Dacre, solicitor; Detective Sergeant Edgar Wield; WDC Shirley Novello; and myself, Detective Chief Inspector Peter Pascoe.

"Mrs. Fraser, you are still under caution. I hope you're feeling better. If at any time you feel in need of a break for refreshment or for medical attention, please do not hesitate to say so."

He stared Jools Dacre straight in the eye as he spoke. They both knew he was trying to repair the damage of the last interview, and she nodded as if in approval of his effort, at the same time smiling faintly as if to indicate it was wasted.

At least this time he didn't have the ticking bomb of the Fat Man at his side.

Dalziel had been surprisingly conciliatory, as if the evidence of the fingerprints and fire report had settled him down. It had started the previous afternoon when the doorbell had rung just after the Queen's Speech.

"Probably Prince Charles doing an abdication poll," said Ellie.

A moment later Pascoe heard her saying, "Good Lord, it's never you," and wondered if she'd been right.

Then a most unregal voice said, "Nay, lass, I've not got me dates mixed. Supper on the twenty-eighth, right? But I just thought I'd drop in as I was passing."

It had become a tradition that the Fat Man came round for a meal between Christmas and New Year, bringing with him a present for Rosie. *Three kings more my style than Santa Claus,* he explained.

The little girl, who adored her Uncle Andy, ran to him now and insisted on taking him on a guided tour of her gifts, which had been plentiful enough to soothe her disappointment at the absence of the wished-for Rollerblades.

"Passing? To or from *where?"* whispered Ellie.

Pascoe, who thought he'd caught a whiff of ash, guessed Ridley, but he said nothing. He poured a Highland measure of Highland malt and waited for Dalziel to finish his avuncular duties.

"Cheers," said the Fat Man. "Pete, about yesterday, the interview, I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I were out of order."

"Well, yes, I suppose maybe you were a bit," said Pascoe, taken aback.

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"No doubt about it. Thing is, Joe Fraser meant a lot to me. Was a time way back when I were up for promotion to DI and something came up that could have got in the way. I'd made a few enemies upstairs who'd have been glad of an excuse to put a block in . . . "

He shook his great head as if finding this incomprehensible.

"Any road, Joe Fraser took it all on him. I got my promotion, Joe spent a year or so longer as a constable than he should have done. I owed him and never got round to paying, so you can see how this hit me."

He sniffed, either in grief or to get the bouquet of his scotch, which Pascoe wouldn't have been surprised to see vanish up those infundibular nostrils.

He said, "I understand, sir. And I know you're as keen as I am to see that justice is done."

"Aye, we're all on the same side, even your mate Ms. Dacre, Ellie."

Ellie said, "Andy, if you're going to talk about this poor woman, let's get one thing clear. Anything Peter says to me about a case is confidential, but he's the only one I extend that privilege to, okay? Maybe I should head for the kitchen."

"Nay, lass, no need for that. I'm not saying owt that's not for public consumption. I know you're a great supporter of VIM, and so am I. And I know how easy it is to be fooled by folk. No one knows what really goes on inside a marriage except them as are in there, slogging it out."

He accompanied this with a glance at the Pascoes of such classical significance, Christie's would have needed an export licence to sell it to America.

"All right, I beat him up occasionally, but what the hell," said Ellie. "So you're willing to accept that your old oppo might have been a wife-basher after all?"

"Owt's possible," said Dalziel with a sigh. "But Smokey were my mate. If not wanting to think ill of your mates is a crime, then bang me up and throw away the key."

The pathos was as rich as Christmas pudding.

"Why did you call him Smokey Joe?" asked Ellie brightly.

"Thirty a day man. Always has been."

"So, nothing to do with Joe Frazier, the boxer. Wasn't that his nickname?"

"*Smokin',* I think that was. But aye, that could have come into it. Did a bit of boxing, did Joe. Tidy light-middleweight way back."

"Handy skill if you wanted to hit someone and leave no marks," said Ellie, unable to remain unprovocative for long.

"Mebbe. What's certain is it came in useful training kids down the boys' clubs, helping keep them off the streets. Listen, Ellie. I

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know you'll be naturally all sympathetic towards Angela. Fair enough. Me, I just saw her through Joe's eyes. Strict Catholic, I gather."

"Hardly a crime."

"No? Thought you reckoned religion was the Prozac of the people? Never mind. Joe were a sort of Catholic too once, but it's hard to stay religious in our job. And there's no denying he were a hard man. He didn't believe in handling criminals with kid gloves, and they went after him a couple of times with complaints. You'll remember yon mad bugger Tommy Bingley, Peter? If ever a man needed thumping, it were Bingley! But nothing were ever proved against Joe, his sheet's as clean as mine."

"That's really reassuring," said Ellie.

Dalziel laughed, then said seriously, "Any road, what you think or what I think doesn't matter, does it? I'm out of it, Pete's in charge. I reckon we can prove that she poured petrol all over him as he lay drunk in his pit. If Ms. Dacre can persuade a court that she was wholly or even partially justified, I'll not quarrel with her. Either way, it won't bring Joe back. Now, I've interrupted your day long enough. See you on the twenty-eighth, luv. And you tomorrow, lad. Cheers!"

After he'd gone, Ellie said, "I feel like Scrooge after the visitations. The fat devil sounded almost human."

"Be careful," said Pascoe. "He's a playground Napoleon. Never stops thinking tactics."

"And you? Don't you play the same games?"

"Not me. I'm the school swot."

But he too was puzzled.

Later the phone had rung. Ellie answered it, talking for some time. When she came back into the room, Pascoe said, "Anyone interesting?"

"Only Jools, just ringing to say Merry Christmas."

"Oh yes. You didn't talk about the case?"

"It was mentioned," she said defensively. "Andy did say I wasn't sworn to secrecy, you heard him. And she says to say she's looking forward to seeing you tomorrow."

"I wish I could return the compliment," said Pascoe.

Not that there was any argument but that Jools Dacre was a very pleasant sight for a man of lively fancy to rest his eyes upon. He moved his gaze firmly to Angela Fraser and said, "Mrs. Fraser, you were telling us that your husband assaulted you on the morning in question. I have here the report of the doctor who examined you in hospital. It mentions burns on your hands and forearms but no other visible injuries. How do you explain that?"

The woman looked at Dacre, who said, "Go on. Tell them what you told me."

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Angela Fraser leaned forward and said almost apologetically, "Joe used to say he knew ways of hitting a man and leaving no sign. He said he could put a man through hell and leave nothing showing that he couldn't have got from sleeping on a hard mattress."

Pascoe frowned and said, "Why did he tell you this? Was it a threat?"

"No. More like a boast, really. He got into bother over some prisoner who accused him of beating him up. I got worried about it and Joe told me not to be daft, that there was no way anything could ever be proved."

"So you have no witness to Sergeant Fraser making this statement?"

Jools Dacre said, "Obviously not, Chief Inspector. But it's well known Sergeant Fraser was a trained boxer. And won't his records show that he was indeed accused of using undue force against Mr. Thomas Bingley, a prisoner in his care?"

Edgar Wield's face was not constructed to give away feelings but Pascoe sensed his body tensing at his side.

Pascoe said, "I think the record will also show no evidence was found to substantiate the charge."

"And I think that's the point Mrs. Fraser has just been making," said Dacre sternly. "While we're on the subject of Sergeant Fraser's violence, I should perhaps mention the corroboration afforded by her consultations with VIM."

"Which have been going on how long?"

She looked at her papers.

"Since mid November."

Edgar Wield leaned forward and said, "Just a few weeks then? Pity."

Dacre stared at him as if amazed that a human voice could come out of a face that wouldn't have disgraced an iguana.

"Why so?" she said.

"If she'd gone to you earlier, you might have had time to give her some good advice."

"Of course she was given good advice," said Dacre indignantly. "And offered a place in our refuge if things got too bad."

"Oh, aye? So she weren't advised to dispose of her husband then, just leave him? Pity she didn't listen."

And now the third member of the interviewing team came in, WDC Novello.

"Come on, Sarge. Sometimes the cure's worse than the disease. Who wants to exchange the comforts of home for a grotty refuge full of whinging women?"

They were turning into a nice double act, these two, thought Pascoe appreciatively.

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"It wasn't like that," cried Mrs. Fraser. "It sounds simple here and now. And when I was sitting talking to the advisers at the refuge, things seemed nice and clear too. But in the small hours of the morning, with everything quiet and cold and dark, I felt so alone, like there was just the two of us and only one of us could survive . . . I felt desperate . . . despairing . . . the sin against the Holy Ghost . . . I couldn't even pray . . . it wasn't my decision . . . sometimes you've got to leave it to the angels to choose . . ."

Her voice had risen close to a shriek and Jules Dacre put a protective arm around her.

"I think we'd like a break now, Peter," she said urgently.

The Fat Man would have gone in with both boots, thought Pascoe as he suspended the interview and said, "I'll send some coffee in."

Outside he said, "So what do you think?"

"Don't know," said Novello. "She looks so ill, it's hard to see deeper than the symptoms. Lot depends on how well this domestic violence stuff stands up. Is it true what Dacre says about Sergeant Fraser being investigated for assault on a prisoner?"

"Oh, aye," said Wield. "Tommy Bingley. Don't know how Dacre got onto that seeing the complaint was thrown out."

"Then they can't use it in court anyway."

"I don't think anyone will object," said Pascoe. "Certainly not the super."

Novello was puzzled.

"But I thought Joe Fraser was his special mate. Or am I missing something?"

Pascoe and Wield exchanged glances. Then the sergeant said, "Tommy Bingley is a serial complainant. There's hardly an officer in Mid-Yorkshire he hasn't accused of beating him up. We've even got him on video inflicting injuries on himself to back up his story. He's been in Wakefield for the last five years, and I hear he accuses the prison officers by turn, alphabetically, once a month. If Ms. Dacre tries to use Tommy to support her case that Fraser was violent, she'll look a real nana. Whoever leaked that to her wasn't doing her a favour."

"Indeed," said Pascoe. "See they get some coffee in there, will you? I'm going to have a word with the super."

He found Dalziel in the canteen. This was not an area much frequented by high-ranking officers, but the Fat Man avowed that they did the best bacon and bangers this side of Paradise.

He was tucking into a plate packed with enough fat to see a polar bear through two hibernations.

"How do, Pete lad," he said. "Got that cow safely tethered yet?"

"Not quite," said Pascoe. "But you'll be pleased to hear your little game worked."

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"I'm not with you, lad."

"You were with me yesterday, making sure Ellie heard about Tommy Bingley accusing Smokey Joe?"

"You're never saying your missus mentioned it to Ms. Dacre? You ought to have words there, Peter," said the Fat Man seriously.

"Oh, I shall. And I'll mention that everyone from the PM to the Queen Mother's being accused by Bingley too!"

"Aye, well, I'll give Her Royal Highness the benefit but I'm not so sure about Tony. Nay, lad, don't take on so or you'll ruin them baby good looks. Heard something might interest you, though. Christmas Day Mass in the hospital. Our Angela didn't take communion."

"So what? She's ill."

"Or nursing a mortal sin."

As he spoke, his gaze drifted behind Pascoe, and suddenly his face lit up with a smile like dawn on Ben Nevis.

"Hey there, young Deirdre, you pushing for plain-clothes transfer or wha'? You'll need to find summat a bit plainer than that. Doesn't she look a picture, Mr. Pascoe?"

Pascoe turned to see that Deirdre Collingwood had come into the canteen with a group of uniformed constables. She was wearing a deep-blue silk blouse and tight-fitting burgundy jeans. It was the first time Pascoe had seen her out of uniform. She looked several years older than nineteen, and very attractive.

Breaking away from her friends, she came to the Fat Man's table.

"Hello, sir," she said. "I'm not back on duty till tomorrow but I was passing and thought I'd just look in . . ."

"Devotion to the job, that's what I like to see," said Dalziel approvingly. "Had a good Christmas so far, lass? That's a lovely necklet you've got there. Prezzie, was it?"

She had a heavy gold chain round her neck from which depended a single ruby to match the one shining in her engagement ring.

"Yes, sir. From my fiancé. Sir . . ."

"Aye, Deirdre's engaged to young Sandy Armstrong, Mr. Pascoe. You'll know his dad, runs the Land Rover dealership down Millgate. You've done well there, lass. It'll be four-wheel drive all the way once you and Sandy get hitched. Hope you won't let it interfere with your career. But no need nowadays. Lass can enjoy a happy marriage and still make a good career."

"Sir," she said, "I was wondering how Angela, Mrs. Fraser, was . . . "

"As well as can be expected," said Dalziel, very serious. "I'm sorry you got mixed up in that t'other day. I didn't realise you

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were close. You did very well in the circumstances. Here, sit down and Mr. Pascoe'll get you a cup of something."

The girl's face was showing signs of strain again.

"No, I can't stay," she said. "Sandy's outside . . . I just said I had to pop in for a few moments. What's going to happen to Mrs. Fraser? What really happened that morning? I read the papers but they don't seem to know much. . . ."

"That's 'cos we don't know much ourselves," said Dalziel. "Mr. Pascoe's still interviewing the poor woman. But if what she says about all that violence stands up, then there'll be plenty of sympathy for her in court. The DCI can pass on your regards. He's just going back up there now, aren't you, Mr. Pascoe?"

"That's right," said Pascoe. "I'll finish talking to you later, sir."

And if that sounded threatening, good! Back in the interview room, Angela Fraser was looking frail but composed.

"All right?" he said to Jools Dacre. She gave him a nod and without further ado he started the tape, spoke the ritual words, then went on, "So let's cut to the chase. We've heard how your husband assaulted you, Mrs. Fraser. What happened next?"

His new brusqueness of manner won him a warning glare from the solicitor but her client didn't seem to notice.

"Eventually he stopped," said Mrs. Fraser. "I was lying on the floor. I didn't move. He sat there drinking the whisky. I think he must have got through the whole bottle. Then he said something like, 'What are we going to do, Angel?' That's what he called me. Sometimes. And I said, 'You mean, what are you going to do, Joe? It's you who're destroying everything we built together. Go on like this and you'll have destroyed it all.' Then he sat quiet for a long while till at last he said, 'Maybe that will be best then,' and he got up and went out."

"To the bedroom."

"No. Into the kitchen. I thought I heard the door into the garage open and I hoped he wasn't going to get the car out and drive away. He wasn't fit, you see." Her tone of concern was pathetic in every sense of the word.

"But he didn't?"

"No. He came back into the hallway. We've got cork tiles. You can hear every footstep. He stood there a moment like he was thinking of coming back into the lounge. Then I heard him going down the passage to our bedroom."

"What did you do then?"

"I lay where I was for a long while. Finally I stood up. And I started clearing up again. Like I told you, that's what I do."

Pascoe glanced at his two colleagues. They avoided his gaze.

He said, "How much time had passed?"

"An hour. Two. I've no idea. When I finished, I sat down on the

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sofa and waited. I thought he might come back in. I think I fell asleep. It's exhausting, this kind of thing, you know. Finally I went to the bedroom. I thought it should be safe by now, and I was right. He was lying across the bed, snoring. He didn't look as if he'd wake up for hours. You have to believe me. He really didn't."

There was a sudden urgency in her voice which Pascoe couldn't understand. Perhaps she thought that setting fire to a man asleep was less reprehensible than if he were awake.

"So what did you do then, Mrs. Fraser?" he said coldly.

"I just stood looking down at him and wondering what God meant by it all. Then I noticed the smell."

"The smell?" he echoed, puzzled. "What smell?"

"The petrol, of course," she said impatiently. "I touched the bedspread. It was sodden. The carpet, the furniture, everything. There was a petrol can on the floor. I picked it up. The top was off and it was empty. And then I realised what he'd meant by saying what he did about destroying everything."

Pascoe closed his eyes briefly, partly to adjust to this unexpected turn, partly to say a little prayer of thanks that Dalziel wasn't in the room.

"You're saying it was your husband who poured the petrol?" he said, trying to sound neutral.

"Oh, yes. But just because he was drunk, Mr. Pascoe," she said eagerly. "He wouldn't really have meant any harm. And then because he was so very drunk, he must have fallen into a stupor before he could set it alight. I saw the hand of God in that."

He felt like closing his eyes again, but didn't.

"But it was set alight, wasn't it, Mrs. Fraser? Was that God's hand too? Or yourself?"

Now that was a turn of phrase the Fat Man would have been proud of!

All it provoked was an irritable shaking of the head, as if at a small child's lack of understanding.

"I took the petrol can into the kitchen to put it out of harm's way," she said. "It was like being in a dream. I thought I ought to move Joe, but he was too heavy for me by myself. Then I decided the best thing to do was ring for help."

"Hold on," commanded Pascoe, determined not to be sidetracked. "By the time you rang for help, the fire had started. So who set it going, Mrs. Fraser? Was it you who lit the petrol?"

She looked at him as if he were crazy.

"No. It was Joe. I should have known. It was my fault."

This was getting worse.

"Known what, Mrs. Fraser?"

"Known that if he woke up he'd do what he always did when he woke. Every morning as long as we'd been married. Doesn't . . .

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didn't even open his eyes. He just pulled out a cigarette and lit it. I saw him. Oh God."

Pascoe looked at Jools Dacre in wild surmise. Did he imagine a small sympathetic smile?

He tried again.

"Mrs. Fraser, it's quite clear that when you made your phone call for help, the fire had started. You say so yourself."

"No, no. You're wrong. I was ringing to find out what I ought to do about Joe."

"Then why did you say, I quote, *Please come quickly. There's been a dreadful accident. I think my husband's dead. It's all my fault?"*

The woman looked bewildered. Jools Dacre was delving into her briefcase.

"I think you're confused, Mr. Pascoe," she said. "But perhaps understandably so. You are referring to Mrs. Fraser's call of six-eleven A.M. to the fire service. The call for help she is talking about was made nine minutes earlier, at six-oh-two A.M."

He was beginning to feel more concussed than confused.

"An earlier call? Who to? What was said? Why haven't we been told about this?"

"I should have thought that a routine check with the telephone company would have given you this information," said Dacre sweetly. "Fortunately, I'm in a position to help you with the detail. You see, the call was to me. Or rather, to my answer machine. And I have a copy of the tape here and shall, of course, be happy to make the original available."

From her case she produced a portable cassette player, set it on the table, and switched it on.

"Hello . . . Miss Dacre . . . it's me, Angela Fraser. . . . You're probably still in bed . . . I didn't know who else to ring . . . it's Joe . . . he came home drunk and he started beating me and he's poured petrol all over the bedroom and he's lying there drunk and I don't know what to do . . . oh God, he's moving . . . Joe, no! JOE!"

The voice rose to a scream and the scream ran into a sound like a huge balloon being pricked. Then a bang as the phone fell, noises off, footsteps running, the voice shouting, and finally silence as the tape ran its allocated course.

Jools Dacre said, "Mrs. Fraser was standing in the hallway of her bungalow making the call. She could see down the passageway into the bedroom where her husband lay. But when he woke and she realised what he was going to do, she was too far away to do anything but scream. It's all on the tape. She did all she could to save her husband. As you can see, going through it all again has been a considerable ordeal for her, and I suggest this interview now ends."

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She was right. Mrs. Fraser looked ready to drop. Her black-rimmed eyes, huge in her pale pinched face, fixed on Pascoe and she said earnestly, "The angels took him, Mr. Pascoe, not me. The angels . . ."

And with perfect timing as he switched off the tape, she fainted into her solicitor's arms.

3.

"December twenty-eighth, nineteen ninety-eight. Ten thirty-five A.M. Interview of Mrs. Angela Fraser resumes. Present, Ms. Juliet Dacre, solicitor; Detective Superintendent Andrew Dalziel; Woman Detective Constable Shirley Novello; and myself, Detective Chief Inspector Peter Pascoe."

When Dalziel heard the outcome of the Boxing Day interview, he'd reacted with a strange calm, like the silence of the big guns after a long barrage. He'd played the answerphone tape twice, then shook his head sadly and said, "So I got it wrong, did I? Well, well."

He played the tape again.

"Hear anything else there, besides Angela's voice?" he asked.

"Apart from the explosion?" said Pascoe. "No. And this came from Jools Dacre, remember."

"Aye, I'm sure it's genuine. But I'll send the original down to the lab anyway. So, Peter, it were all an accident after all."

"An act of God, according to Mrs. Fraser. Or—how did she put it?—the angels took him."

"Great one for angels, our Angela. One thing, but. This stuff about Joe pouring the petrol himself. You persuaded?"

"Not completely. But even if Angela did it herself, then got scared and changed her mind, it was still an accident. All right, we could charge her with reckless endangerment, but what are we going to get? A bad press and a suspended sentence."

"We'll get the truth, lad," said Dalziel ponderously. "So get her back in. We'll need her to sign a statement anyway. No rush, though. Let's show some sensitivity, eh? Tomorrow . . . no, day after, twenty-eighth. I'd best be there to make my peace. When I get things wrong, I know how to take my bumps."

And here he was, still all sweetness and light, in stark contrast to the boorishness he'd displayed on Christmas Eve.

So why don't I feel like a shepherd in the field abiding listening to the Christmas message? Pascoe asked himself.

After his initial charm offensive, Dalziel retired once more to the depths of his box file. This, at least, hadn't changed. It still contained what might have been the same meat pie plus a copy of the local paper's first post-Christmas edition, with what looked like a piece about the Ridley tragedy in it.

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"Right," said Pascoe. "Mrs. Fraser, I'm pleased to see you looking so much better."

It wasn't flannel. She really did look a lot better. For the first time, Pascoe could see her as an adult woman, not a victimised waif, which made it easier to launch his last assault.

He said, "Mrs. Fraser, when you removed the petrol can from the bedroom, how did you carry it?"

"It's got a handle," she said, surprised.

"Yes, I know. But if it was heavy you might have needed to take two hands to it."

Dacre came in smoothly at sight of what she took to be a trap.

"Mrs. Fraser has told you her husband had already emptied the can, so lifting it one-handed would have been no problem."

"Of course," said Pascoe. "The thing is, while no definite prints from your husband's fingers can be found, yours are very clear. On the handle. And all four fingers of your left hand on the underside."

He did a mime, making a tipping motion.

Jools Dacre demanded furiously, "Just where is this leading us? It was a stressful situation. The exact details of how Mrs. Fraser grasped the can are naturally vague in her mind."

Andy Dalziel suddenly sat up straight, smiling and nodding his head as though the piece he'd been reading in the newspaper had come to a satisfactory conclusion. Then he shut his box file with a tremendous crash and said, "I agree with Ms. Dacre. This is all a bit insensitive, Chief Inspector. And not all that *germane.*"

It was like being stabbed by Brutus. But before he could offer a dying reproach, there was a tap at the door, which opened to reveal Edgar Wield.

"Sorry to interrupt, sir," said the sergeant. "But WDC Novello's needed urgently. Only take half an hour."

"Damn," said Dalziel. Then, smiling unctuously at Dacre, he said, "Can you hang on another thirty minutes or so?"

"I can't for the life of me see why we should. Do we really need DC Novello?"

"CPS guidelines, female officer present when interviewing a female witness," said Dalziel. "Could you dig us up another lass, Sergeant?"

"Bit thin on the ground, sir. No one in CID. Did see WPC Collingwood in the canteen."

Dalziel shook his great head reprovingly, smiled reassuringly at Mrs. Fraser, and said, "She'd never do. . . . "

And suddenly the woman, faintly but definitely, was smiling back. Now she looked different again, thought Pascoe. Now she looked . . . in control?

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"Please," she said, "Don't worry on my account. If she doesn't mind, it would be nice to see a friendly face."

Jools Dacre didn't look like she agreed, but Dalziel was saying, "Grand. Wheel her in then, Sergeant. Tell her it'll only be for a few minutes."

And then the charade was over, for Pascoe had no doubts that this was what it was. Wield had been put up to this; the box file banged on the table had been a signal; the stuff about CPS guidelines and shortage of women officers was mere verbiage.

He thought of suspending proceedings and demanding an explanation, but while he was still debating, the door opened.

"WPC Collingwood has entered the room," said Dalziel. "Take a seat, lass."

Mrs. Fraser was smiling again, this time to welcome the young constable, but Deirdre wasn't responding. She looked almost as bad as Angela on Boxing Day. Maybe she'd had a very heavy Christmas.

"Right, let's get on," said the Fat Man, now very much the ringmaster. "Mrs. Fraser, Angela, shouldn't need to keep you much longer. What I've done is prepare a statement based on your own words. Perhaps you could read through it, then, if you agree with it, sign it and that'll be us done."

He opened his boxfile again and took out a folder hidden beneath the newspaper. Apologetically blowing off a few pie crumbs, he handed it to Angela Fraser. With Jools Dacre peering over her shoulder, she began to read.

"If you could do it aloud, luv, for the tape, that would really speed things up," said Dalziel.

"Superintendent, I don't see why . . . "

But the woman interrupted her solicitor.

"It's all right. I don't mind. In fact, it might help."

Quietly, she began reading.

It was, Pascoe had to admit, a beautifully prepared statement: clear, balanced, and perfectly tailored to the woman's tongue. He felt moved as he listened. This was more than simple narrative, it was a requiem for a marriage. Mrs. Fraser's tone was sad and serious. He felt sympathy for her as he listened, and admiration too. He glanced at the Fat Man to see how he was reacting and saw that his gaze was not directed at Angela Fraser.

He was watching Deirdre Collingwood.

And in that moment, Pascoe solved the charade. This was what it had all been about, a device to get this girl in this room listening to these words from Angela Fraser's own mouth.

She was weeping silently, tears tracking down her pale cheeks. This was the bubbling over of a grief her young will wasn't strong enough to contain. And he knew beyond doubt that it wasn't

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Angela Fraser she was grieving for; it was Smokey Joe Fraser; and it was herself.

Behind the blank of Dalziel's face he read something too. Anxiety. Somehow this was a last throw. Whatever game he was playing, if all he got out of Deirdre were silent tears, he'd lost.

". . . I rang Juliet Dacre because I'd met her at VIM and she'd been very supportive and told me to contact her if ever I needed help. I got her answer machine and while I was talking, I looked along the passage into the bedroom through the open door, and I saw Joe move. He was still more than half asleep but he was pulling his old cigarette case out of his pocket. I knew what he was going to do because every morning of his life, the very first thing he did was light a cigarette. I think I shouted, but it was too late. He flicked his lighter and everything went up in flames. I'll never forgive myself. Despite everything, I loved Joe, and I believe he loved me. . . ."

And Dalziel had won.

Collingwood was on her feet, spilling her chair behind her.

"Bitch, bitch, lying bitch!" she screamed. "Stinking, lying, murdering bitch. He hated you . . . he wanted to leave you and marry me . . . liar! liar! liar!"

She was leaning across the table, spitting the words into Mrs. Fraser's face. Jools Dacre was on her feet too, her arms defensively around her client while Dalziel grappled the WPC from behind.

Only Angela Fraser looked unperturbed.

"Oh, you poor child," she said with infinite compassion. "You loved him, didn't you? I never knew. You poor child."

Dalziel dragged the sobbing girl out of the room, leaving Pascoe to turn off the tape and pick up the pieces.

Jools Dacre was regarding him with cold fury.

"Did you know that Constable Collingwood had a relationship with Sergeant Fraser?" she demanded.

"I'd no idea," said Pascoe.

She scrutinised him closely, then said, "No. It's not your style, Peter. But that fat bastard . . . I'll see it's the last time he pulls a stroke like this."

"Yes. I'm sorry. Please, will you just wait in here a moment?"

He went out. Once more, as on Christmas Eve, he saw the Fat Man in his office in close confabulation with Deirdre Collingwood. This time he didn't interrupt.

After several minutes, Dalziel came out into the corridor with the girl. She didn't look at Pascoe but headed straight into a cloakroom.

"Repairs," said the Fat Man. "So what can I do you for, lad?"

"You can tell me what's going on."

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"Simple, lad. Smokey Joe and Deirdre had a bit of a thing going while she was on attachment out at Ridley. Nothing surprising about that. Joe was famous for chancing his arm with any pretty plod who came his way. Hit or miss, it meant nowt. No comebacks, and usually they stayed friends. Real charmer, Joe."

Pascoe said, "And his wife, was she charmed?"

"In a way. Thought sex was for having kids, and when she found she couldn't, she gave it up. Turned a blind eye to Joe getting his exercise elsewhere, long as he didn't frighten the horses. Like I told you afore, divorce was out 'cos the Church said so, and separation was out 'cos she said so."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me about Fraser's reputation?" demanded Pascoe.

"Thought everyone knew," said Dalziel. "You should spend more time in the canteen. Deirdre seemed the same as the rest. Enjoyed the exercise, then moved back to HQ and got down to the business of carving out a career, plus she got herself engaged. She kept young Sandy, her fiancé, well clear of the job. Didn't want him put off by seeing the plods at their play. But she really liked Joe, and when they ran into each other at the club, early in November, she didn't see any obstacle to a one-nighter. Trouble was, Joe began to get serious, which put her in a dilemma. If word got out, naturally it would put the kibosh on her engagement. And breaking up a cop's marriage could get her card marked in her career."

"Why not just drop it?"

"Not so easy. Very persuasive guy, was Joe. Things drifted till they met at the Christmas thrash. When we saw Joe leaving, he was heading round the corner to meet up with Deirdre in her car."

"You knew this at the time?"

"No. But I'd clocked him smooching with her at the party. When I went back in, I couldn't see her anywhere, and when I realised it had taken Joe over two hours to travel twenty miles . . ."

"Well spotted, sir, but I don't see where all this is leading."

"It's leading to Smokey Joe getting home and telling his missus he's dumping her for Deirdre."

"And what difference do you imagine that makes?"

"Come on, lad! For a start, it makes the difference between Smokey Joe beating up his wife, which is a crime, and wanting to leave her, which ain't."

Pascoe shook his head and said urgently, "Sir, it doesn't matter. Okay, I can see how you'd prefer to think of your mate as a womanizer rather than a wife-beater, though I should point out the two aren't incompatible, and she did go to VIM. Anyway, all we're doing is arguing motives when there's been no crime. It was an accident. You've heard the tape. I suppose the lab's confirmed it's genuine. . . ."

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"Aye. Those tech lads are wonderful. Something I'd like you to hear, but."

He drew Pascoe into his room. On his desk was a cassette player. He switched it on. Angela's voice came out, very loud and distorted, then slowly it faded away, and in among the hiss and buzz Pascoe heard a sort of tinkling, chiming noise which had something familiar about it.

"Recognise that? No? How about this?"

From a drawer, the Fat Man took a set of angel chimes and lit the candles. Round and round went the angels, sending up their tinkling notes.

Puzzled, Pascoe said, "Yes, could be that. So what?"

"So listen again."

Dalziel blew out the candles, and played the tape once more.

"Notice how the chimes fade away, then suddenly there's that explosion as the petrol goes up? Now, imagine you're in the hallway of that bungalow, talking on the phone, leaving a timed message on your solicitor's answer machine. You've got the chime candles burning on the hall table which has got wheels on. Okay?"

"With you so far."

But beginning to wish he wasn't.

"Grand," said Dalziel, going through an elaborate mime. "Now, as you talk you give the table a firm push. The entrance hall's got corked tiles. The table runs straight and smooth down the hall, along the passage, through the bedroom door. WHOOSH! End of Smokey Joe, and you've got a tape to support your story."

"And what exactly do you have to support yours?" enquired Pascoe skeptically.

"There's this," said Dalziel. From the drawer he pulled an evidence bag containing a small twisted lump of brass.

"Found that in the bedroom ashes," he said. "Bit of wax on it, too. Also found what could be the wheels off a small table. There you are, lass. With you in a tick."

Deirdre Collingwood had appeared in the doorway, looking wan but presentable. She moved away.

"In other words, you've got nothing," said Pascoe. "Which is why you're using that child. First time, you were just fishing. This time you knew exactly what you were doing, getting her back into the interview."

"Child? Wash your mouth out, Chief Inspector. She's an adult woman and a trained cop. She wanted back in, and yon bitch wanted her back in too, so's she could see her suffer."

"She'll get her wish then, won't she?" said Pascoe angrily. "This could ruin Collingwood, professionally and personally. And for what? Even in the remote contingency you're right, you're never going to prove anything. Face it, sir. It's over."

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"Not till the fat lady sings, isn't that what the Yanks say? Watch this space, lad. I may be on the turn. Get back inside, I'll be along shortly."

He went out of the room and walked away deep in conversation with the WPC.

Full of foreboding, Pascoe returned to the interview room.

Jools Dacre said, "About time. Mrs. Fraser, acting on my advice, is ready to sign the statement."

"Excellent," said Pascoe. "If we can just wait for the superintendent."

"Why? We only need one police witness, and after I'm finished with him, Mr. Dalziel's signature will carry very little weight."

Pascoe doubted it. To the Fat Man, solicitors' complaints were like flea bites to Tyrannosaurus rex. But it might be a good move to get the statement signed and the women on their way before the dinosaur returned.

He almost succeeded, but Dalziel reentered the room just as the women stood up to leave.

"Sorry about that," he said, beaming. "Young lasses today, eh? I blame television."

"Mrs. Fraser has just signed her statement, sir," said Pascoe.

"Grand. Then that's that. Poor Joe. Smoking killed him in the end. Sorry, luv, but I can imagine how you felt when you saw him drag out that old cigarette case and lighter. He inherited them from his granddad, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"Lighter never failed," he said. "More's the pity. It was definitely that lighter, was it, the one made from a bullet?"

"Oh yes."

"And the old gun-metal case?"

"Superintendent, this is very insensitive," said Jools Dacre.

"Sorry. Just anticipating questions the coroner might ask. He'll likely want to establish just how clearly Mrs. Fraser could see from the hallway. It was still dark, after all."

"The bedroom light was on and I could see quite clearly," said Mrs. Fraser firmly. "It was definitely his old lighter and case."

"So that's settled. Funny, but. The fire lads didn't find any trace of them anywhere near the body."

Jools Dacre said, "So? With a fire of such intensity they probably melted."

"Still would have left some trace," said Dalziel. "And there's something else. WPC Collingwood claims she drove your husband home that night, Mrs. Fraser. She says they parked in a lay-by. To have sex."

No reaction.

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Dalziel continued, "Afterwards she says he swore he was going to get a divorce and marry her."

This got a rueful shaking of the head and the woman said, "Joe always told a good story. I'm sorry if Deirdre was taken in."

"Actually, she wasn't. Also she'd got other fish to fry. Trying to let him down soft, she said she wouldn't dream of marrying a man who always stank of tobacco. And he said, that's easy, I'll give it up."

Now Angela Fraser laughed out loud.

"The silly child," she said derisively. "I'll tell you something, Mr. Dalziel. There was more chance of Joe giving up breathing than smoking."

"Given up both now, hasn't he?" said the Fat Man softly. "But he must have been serious at the time 'cos the last thing he did before he got out of her car was put these into the glove compartment."

And onto the table, with a crash that echoed round the room like gunfire, Dalziel tossed a metal cigarette case and a lighter made out of a bullet.

Her face waif-pale again, Angela Fraser sank back into her chair.

As she diminished, Dalziel seemed to swell.

The fat lady's going to sing, thought Pascoe.

"That's right, lass. Make thyself comfortable," said Dalziel with terrifying solicitude.

"Mr. Pascoe, why don't you switch the tape back on? Now this interview can really begin."

That evening, as they prepared for Dalziel's visit, Pascoe told Ellie what had happened.

"So," she said. "One woman facing a murder charge, another with her career and engagement in tatters, and Jools Dacre looking an asshole. The Fat Controller should be bouncing tonight."

"Ellie, he's our guest. So stay cool, please."

"You know me. Miss Frigidaire. I can keep a truce."

"Yeah? I sometimes think if you'd been playing football in no man's land back on Boxing Day, nineteen fourteen, you'd have been sent off for fighting."

But all had gone well, mainly because of Rosie's presence at the table. The Fat Man's fondness for the girl and her unambiguous love for her Uncle Andy created an atmosphere it was hard to resist.

At the end of the meal they headed into the lounge for coffee, but at the doorway Dalziel whispered something to Rosie, then retreated.

"What did Uncle Andy say?" asked Ellie suspiciously.

"Nothing," said the girl, all innocence. "Gone to the lavatory, I expect."

They sat in a silence which somehow became expectant. Then there was a sound like a finger tapping on the French window,

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and immediately Rosie got up and drew the curtains as for a stage performance.

Nothing moved outside, but something had triggered the patio security light.

Seconds passed, and Pascoe was just about to break the silence when into the illuminated area moved a figure. It was Dalziel, hands behind his back, left leg in the air, gliding smoothly and elegantly across the stone flags on his right foot. He vanished into the shadows only to reappear a moment later, this time gliding backwards on the other foot.

"Oh God," said Ellie. "He's on Rollerblades."

She tried to look furious but it was hard with Pascoe laughing out loud and Rosie clapping her hands in glee.

Now he was back, legs astride, doing a circle. And finally he performed a little pirouette in the middle of the patio, came right up to the window, and made a deep bow, at the same time moving slowly backwards.

"Andy," called Pascoe. "Andy, I shouldn't . . . watch out . . . oh hell!"

The Fat Man had reached the edge of the patio unawares. For a moment he teetered there, mouth agape, arms waving madly, then he tumbled backwards onto the shadowy lawn.

They rushed out, picked him up, and brought him in.

"I'm fine, bit of a bruise mebbe, nowt a gill or two of malt won't cure."

"I didn't know skating was one of your talents," said Pascoe, pouring the drink.

"Lots you don't know about me, lad. Used to be a bobby-dazzler on the ice. Nay, lass, they're no good for thy little plates of meat."

Rosie had slipped her feet hopefully into the discarded blades.

Dalziel glanced at Ellie, who returned his gaze blankly, then he said to the girl, "They can be grand fun, these things, like your dad says. But you saw me take a tumble out there, so you'll know they can be dangerous too, like your mum says. If you ever got a pair of your own, you'd need to be trained proper by someone who knew what they were doing."

"Someone like you, Andy?" said Ellie.

"Aye, mebbe."

"And this someone would take full responsibility for instilling safety rules, making sure she understands that she is never to use these things on a pavement or near a public highway?"

"I'd beat it into her with a rubber truncheon," said Dalziel.

"I'll need that in writing. . . . Rosie, what are you doing?"

Her daughter had struck a match and was setting it to the candles under the angel chimes.

"I'm just lighting a candle for me and Uncle Andy to make sure we come to no harm on our rollers," she explained.

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Ellie and Pascoe exchanged glances, then the Fat Man said, "If you go outside to my car, you might find some sort of parcel on the front seat."

Rosie looked at her mother, who nodded, then she rushed out of the room.

The candle flames were setting the brass vanes spinning faster and faster and gradually the soft golden sound of the chimes filled the room and their thoughts.

Suddenly Ellie said, "Andy, I never said, I'm really sorry about your friend, for your loss, I mean."

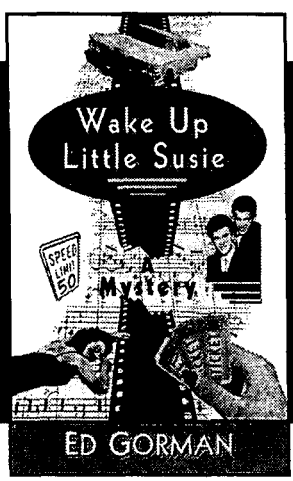
"Yeah. Well, thanks," said Dalziel. "Here's to you, Joe."

He raised his glass. Pascoe and Ellie followed suit.

"To Joe."

They heard Rosie open the front door. The through draught pulled open the French window, which had been left ajar, and for a second the candle flames burnt still brighter in the rush of cold air.

Then they all went out together, and the chimes fell silent, and nothing remained but a few thin skeins of grey smoke which rose slowly to the ceiling before they too faded away. ●



"Subtle and powerful . . . Gorman puts an ironic spin on every detail from fast cars to Ayn Rand to Gold Medal Books. The tapestry is so rich."

--Kirkus Reviews

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WORD OF MOUTH

by Percy Spurlark Parker

In 1996, Percy Spurlark Parker moved from Chicago, where his best-known series featuring P.I. Bull Benson is set, to Las Vegas. But as he recently informed fellow members of the Chicago chapter of Mystery Writers of America, "I haven't been spending all my time in the casinos. Currently *EQMM* has three stories of mine awaiting publication and I've just sold another mini mystery to *Woman's World*." Here's the first of the *EQMM* three.

They finally arrested Claude for murdering his wife. I don't know what took them so long. I'd heard they were planning to do it last week. Marybeth told me. She got it from Ethel, who got it from Joyce, who got it from Anna. Anna's cousin's best friend has been working the switchboard at the police station for the past twelve years. It was like getting it straight from the chief of police himself.

I'd told my sister Marge it was going to happen as soon as I'd gotten the word. She'd had that little questioning tone in her voice she always gets, and had approached me twice since, questioning my sources. Even when we were kids she never believed what I told her the first time around. She's always accused me of being a gossip, spreading lies. Yet, when I've been proven right, she's never been there with an apology.

That's the way it was when the police came and carted Claude off in handcuffs. Marge and I watched from our porch next door. Claude had such an odd look on his face, not sadness or fear, more bewilderment than anything else. And as always, Marge didn't give me so much as a nod for having the right information. It used to bother me at first, but I've come to expect it.

Marge and I have been in this old house together for close to nine years now. It's our family home, we were both raised in it. I never moved out, even when I got married. I think that was something else Marge held against me, me being two years her junior and getting married first. As it turned out, she was married much longer than I was. My Jerry, like a lot of young men in our town,

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went off to Vietnam. Unfortunately he wasn't one of the ones who returned. Marge married and relocated to Iowa for a number of years, until her Ben had his heart attack. By then, never having remarried, I had this big old house all to myself. It simply made sense for Marge to move in with me. We get visits from her children every now and then, but mostly we rattle around in this old place by ourselves.

The house next door had been Claude's family's home for years. I can remember the day they moved in. We were all in grade school back then. He had the shaggiest mop of red hair I'd ever seen on a boy. Most of it is gone now, and what's left is gray and a sort of dull rusty color. When we were all in high school, I think Marge had a slight crush on him, although she would never admit it. She was always the quiet, secretive one in the family. And me, okay, so I'm the chatterbox.

Come to think of it, Claude and Effie got married right after high school. Seven months later, their first child was born. Premature, of course. A lot of eyebrows were raised but no one said anything about it, not out loud anyway.

You could just about guess one would eventually murder the other. It never really seemed to be a happy marriage. It was a topic that often came up between my friends and myself. Not murder, but the question of why they were still together. I mean, the children were grown and out of the way, what was left but to continue to stay together and make each other miserable? That's the way Fran put it once. Their relationship was based on a dislike for each other and that's what held them together. Mabel, who tends to get a little preachy sometimes, thought they were just punishing themselves for starting out their lives together in a sinful manner. Grace thought they actually loved each other, but that their outward show of disdain was due to working long hours in that convenience store they owned. Working with the public can drain you, was one of her favorite sayings. Me, I just saw them as two unhappy people in an unhappy life, and I expected no good to come of it.

I can't tell you the number of times I've heard them arguing. My upstairs bedroom and theirs were only separated by the driveway. The things I've heard, sometimes it was like turning on the TV. One of the cable channels, that is.

Bob Waterbury had found Effie behind the counter at the convenience store. He'd just stopped in for a pack of cigarettes. The register was empty, and she had been shot with the gun they kept at the store for protection. The gun had been dropped beside her and wiped clean of fingerprints. Those particulars about the gun had been hinted at in the local paper, but confirmed by Anna's cousin's friend.

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I've never liked guns, wouldn't have one in the house. But I believe Marge used to go hunting and fishing with Ben. I don't for the life of me know how she did it, I have a problem swatting at flies. My friends all laugh at me about it.

Living next door to each other all these years, Effie and I never became more than nodding acquaintances. That might seem a little strange, but she really didn't fit in with the people I associated with. I mean with Fran, or Joyce, or Marybeth, or a half-dozen others: We can talk on the phone for an hour, see each other thirty minutes later, and talk for another hour or two. With Effie, a five-minute conversation was a filibuster. Okay, I'll admit it, I really didn't like her very much. Not that I wished her dead or anything.

It took the police a couple weeks of hemming and hawing, but they finally got their act together and hauled Claude in this morning. Marge was quick to rush to his defense, telling me the police were crazy to arrest him, that he couldn't possibly have killed Effie. I think that old crush of hers had slipped up on her some. They say you never get over your first love. I'd never gotten over losing Jerry. Guess that's why I never remarried. I reminded her of it and she turned beet red, accused me of being as crazy as the police, and stormed out of the house. Marge has gone off on her own a lot lately, but she wasn't usually mad at me.

She was usually out of the house somewhere on Wednesday nights. She had never told me where. That's one of the nights Effie used to work at the store by herself. Mondays and Wednesdays were her nights, Fridays and Saturdays were Claude's, and they worked together the other times.

I thought of going after Marge, I'm always the one who makes up first, but the phone rang. It was Lilly, wanting to know all the details of Claude's arrest, and I was truly bursting to tell someone.

Marge didn't return until suppertime. She said she had gone to the police station to see Claude, to offer her support and perhaps help him find a lawyer. By then I'd been on the phone with Mabel, and Janice. Helen and Marybeth had come by for tea. We all agreed, if the police had enough evidence to arrest Claude, he was probably guilty. I didn't tell Marge, she was in a bad enough mood as it was. She barely ate her supper, and it was my famous beef stew with June peas and fresh tender carrots. If nothing else, I'm known all over town for my beef stew.

I had the small TV on in the kitchen while I did the dishes, Andy Griffith trying to work himself out of another mess Barney had gotten him into. I seemed to recall Claude driving into his driveway about this same time, when Andy and Barney were at it again, the Wednesday night Effie was murdered. I wondered if that was something I should tell the police. They really hadn't asked Marge or myself any questions. No, I most likely was mis-

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taken. I had to be. How could he have been home and at the store murdering his wife at the same time?

The telephone got me out of bed at six-sixteen, fourteen minutes before I usually rise. This time the information came directly from Linda, whose daughter-in-law's stepbrother was the first paramedic on the scene. It was like being an eyewitness. Claude hanged himself with his bed sheets in his jail cell last night. Definitely not the sort of thing an innocent man would do.

I shared my opinion with Marge and she really went into a rage this time. She started babbling something about Claude being such a fool, sacrificing himself, a waste, he hadn't killed anyone. She kept it up for a good ten minutes, throwing in a whole bunch of other things I couldn't make any sense of, then she ran upstairs and locked herself in her room for the rest of the day.

It seemed like most of the town turned out for Effie and Claude's funeral. Their children buried them side by side, with a joint headstone that was footnoted simply, *Beloved Mom and Dad.* Claude Junior, with his mop of red hair, looked so much like his father used to. It was a pretty somber occasion. If anyone said anything about what had gone on, it was done at barely a whisper.

Marge was one of the few who didn't attend. She had packed and was awaiting a cab when I returned home. I'd tried to talk her out of it, but her mind was made up. She was going back to Iowa. Two of her children still lived there. She said she had had it with me and this town. She didn't explain herself any further. As I've said, she was always the secretive one.

When the cab came, we hugged, said our goodbyes, and promised to write. It would mean six of my letters at least to her one. And if we were ever to see each other again, it would be me going to visit her rather than her returning here.

I was still confused as to why she was leaving as I watched the cab drive off, then it came to me. Neither of us was getting any younger. She probably just wanted to be around her children more. Not having children myself, I could still understand her feeling that way. There was certainly nothing that I or the town had done to make her leave.

I'd planned to watch the cab all the way until it disappeared around the corner two blocks up the street, but the phone rang. I tried to ignore it, but by the third ring I was rushing into the house to get to the receiver. Can I help it if I got all the communicative skills in the family? ○

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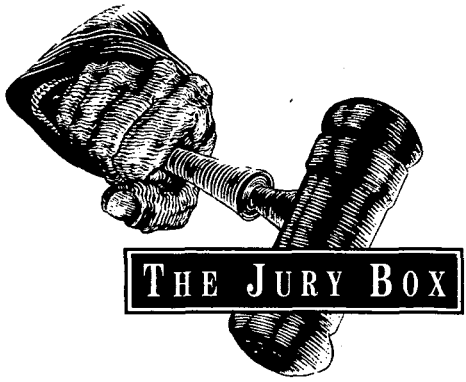

THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

Edgar Allan Poe and Wilkie Collins can be handily pegged as nineteenth-century writers, Dorothy L. Sayers and Dashiell Hammett as twentieth-century writers. But Arthur Conan Doyle, the career of whose Sherlock Holmes extended from 1886 through the 1920s, and Anna Katharine Green, whose mystery-writing career lasted forty-five years from the milestone *The Leavenworth Case* (1878) to *The Step on the Stair* (1923), cannot be as easily assigned to a century. The nine writers reviewed below have all created a substantial body of work in the twentieth century and are certainly young enough to make a mark on the literature of the twenty-first as well.

**** Robert Crais: *L.A. Requiem,* Doubleday, $23.95. Private eye Elvis Cole is asked by silent partner Joe Pike, a tough and taciturn ex-L.A.P.D. officer with a shadowed past, to help search for the missing daughter of tortilla king Frank Garcia. Alternating first and third person narration, the novel probes the characters and their problems, illuminates the Los Angeles scene, and keeps the reader guessing in masterful fashion. If you had Crais pegged as a west-coast Robert B. Parker (i.e., magical style but invisible plot), this complex and enormously entertaining novel should change your mind.

*** Faye Kellerman: *Jupiter's Bones,* Morrow, $25. When cult leader Father Jupiter, formerly known as a major academic physicist, is reported dead at the Order of the Rings of God compound, the L.A.P.D.'s Lt. Peter Decker heads the investigation. Along with the expected tidbits on Orthodox Jewish life, Kellerman provides fascinating background on cult psychology, deprogramming, and theoretical physics along with superb character interplay. I was sorry to see a promising detective story turn into an unconvincing action thriller in the latter

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stages, but Kellerman's people kept me involved.

*** Reginald Hill: *Arms and the Women,* Delacorte, $23.95. Unlikely heroics also reduce the impact of the latest Dalziel and Pascoe novel, but (as with Kellerman) our involvement with the characters saves the day. The real protagonist here is aspiring novelist Ellie Pascoe, whose current project, an Ancient Greek historical of which we read several segments, helps take her mind off the hoped-for sale of her first novel and threats from a mysterious source. Ellie is as complex and interesting a character as Dorothy L. Sayers's Harriet Vane, and the other women of the title are both varied and well-realized. Hill's ear for Yorkshire speech, especially that of Andy Dalziel, is sharp as ever.

*** R.D. Zimmerman: *Innuendo,* Delacorte, $21.95. Gay Twin Cities TV reporter Todd Mills wants an interview with charismatic movie star Tim Chase, married to a beautiful actress but plagued by rumors about his true sexual preference. Zimmerman is good at achieving gut-level reader involvement, and he'll keep you guessing whether you're reading a whodunit or a Columbo-style inverted detective story.

*** Barbara Hambly: *Graveyard Dust,* Bantam, $23.95. In 1834 New Orleans, voodoo practitioner Olympe Corbier is accused, along with the victim's wife, of the poisoning murder of Isaak Jumon. The rich period detail and atmosphere in the third novel about musician Benjamin January, a "free man of color," occasionally threaten to overwhelm the mystery plot, but that won't be a serious drawback for many historical-minded readers. The briefly visited trial has several features unique in courtroom fiction.

*** O'Neil DeNoux: *LaStanza: New Orleans Police Stories,* Pontalba Press, 4417 Dryades Street, New Orleans, LA 70115; $19.95. The New Orleans of DeNoux's Dino LaStanza is a century and a half removed from Hambly's but just as varied, well-observed, and fascinating. Some of these 17 stories, one from *EQMM* and six in print for the first time, began as vignettes from the author's own police career—for example, "Airline Highway," a painfully realistic description of an aircraft disaster. Ironically, one of the tales closest to a conventional detective story ("26 Down") the author says is almost purely nonfictional apart from names and locations.

*** Barbara Paul: *Jack Be Quick and Other Crime Stories,* Five Star, $20.95. Nine tales by the versatile Paul are marked by humor and originality. Especially noteworthy are two historicals: the title story, a feminist take on the Jack the Ripper mystery; and "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Corpse," in which opera star Geraldine Farrar (featured with a comic Enrico Caruso in three of Paul's novels) serves as amateur detec-

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tive. In the *EQMM* story "Play Nice," Paul combines her mystery and science fiction specialties entertainingly. (From the same publisher comes a new collection by Donald E. Westlake, *A Good Story and Other Stories* [$21.95]. Collectors should know that nine of the eighteen stories previously appeared in Westlake's *The Curious Facts Preceding My Execution and Other Fictions* [1968], a tenth in *Tomorrow's Crimes* [1989].)

** Carole Nelson Douglas: *The Cat and the King of Clubs,* Five Star, $20.95. The first adventure for feline detective Midnight Louie, originally published in a destructively edited version as part of *Crystal Days* (Bantam, 1990), now appears as its author intended. Douglas's foreword and "tailpiece" bear out my impression that good writers are sometimes undermined by the rigid editorial strictures of romance publishers. Though the romance has its charms, the principals being a staid English hotel manager and the son of an organized crime family who is renovating a Las Vegas hotel, the mystery content is slight. The other three volumes of the author's Las Vegas Quartet, to follow from the same publisher, promise to increase the mystery quotient.

** Anne Perry: *The Twisted Root,* Ballantine, $25. Mid-Victorian private eye William Monk, now married to Nurse Hester Latterly with whom he has had a prickly relationship through nine previous novels, is asked to find a prospective bride who has vanished. In a related sub-plot, a socially-conscious do-gooder is stealing medications from a hospital pharmacy. Perry is far from her usual standard here: The occasional faults of padding and excessive repetition are intensified, and the courtroom sequences, with barrister Oliver Rathbone uncharacteristically ineffectual and desultory, are a procedural shambles.

Students of crime fiction who use computers should acquire two outstanding reference works on CD-ROM: Allen J. Hubin's *Crime Fiction III: A Comprehensive Bibliography 1749-1995* and William G. Contento's *Mystery Short Fiction Miscellany: An Index* (Locus Press, P.O. Box 13305, Oakland, CA 94661; $49.95 each). Hubin updates by five years the most recent print version of his remarkable work, which lists by author and title some 94,000 books, including contents of single-author collections, listings of motion picture adaptations, and indexes by locales, series characters, and even publishers. Contento adds to his 1990 volume *Index to Crime and Mystery Anthologies* (with Martin H. Greenberg) indexes to anthologies and single-author collections since 1990, plus a full index to *EQMM* and partial indexes of some other mystery magazines. Both supersede their print forerunners with more information, easier to find, and several means of access a computer can achieve and a book can't.

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Art by Mark Evans

REHABILITATION

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

This Christmas was different. For the first time in fifteen years, he had a choice of jobs. Help Wanted signs littered Portland. From restaurants to boutiques, from offices to museums, the red signs with the outlined white lettering beckoned from every window.

But Matt took the job he had taken every year since he started wandering. It still shocked him how quickly the malls hired their Santas, how little time these places, which entrusted other people's children to big men with appealing laughs, spent on researching their employees' backgrounds. When he had started in 1984, barely twenty and hardly large enough to play Santa, computers were rare things, personal data hard to trace. But it wasn't now, and lawsuits were more common. Sometimes he wondered how many of his colleagues in their red suits with fake white fur trim had records, and how many of them used the information they got from a tyke in ways that would have made the real Santa leave coal in their stockings.

He liked playing Santa; it was the only time he felt as if he had

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worth. Every year, he heard from the mall manager that he was the best Santa the mall had ever had, and every year he promised to return the next, and every year, he was somewhere else, with a different name, and a different story. It used to be that he would arrive in his new home with a different dream, but at thirty-five, he was getting too old for dreams. Dreams were a luxury a man like him should never indulge in.

His résumé said nothing about his real past, of course. This year's named him Matthew J. Sturtz, a man who had graduated from the University of Oregon with a Ph.D. in English, who had spent most of his years as a professor of English Literature at Gustavus Adolphus. He was taking a sabbatical, his résumé said, returning to his home state to write the definitive paper on Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," and even though he had only been here a month, he already felt the need for a diversion, a way to interact with people, to get out now and then.

1998 *EQMM* Readers Award winner Kristine Kathryn Rusch, of Lincoln City, Oregon, gave *EQMM* this explanation of her latest story: "Every Christmas a group of Oregon writers gets together and reads stories to each other before a roaring fire. (We also eat lots of goodies and drink too much eggnog and have waaay too good a time.) My story this year turned out to be a holiday mystery. I hope you like it." We think you will! ¶

He had learned, over the years, that such unusual detail—along with the correct addresses and phone numbers—got him a long way in the Santa business. Most false names were common ones, easy to spell, so he always chose something like Sturtz. Most fake résumés were filled with jobs impossible to check, so he made his easy to check, out-of-state, and plausible, so plausible, in fact, that most personnel managers never bothered. When quizzed, he had his answers down so pat that nothing surprised him. He spent October studying Melville and "Bartleby"—he could discuss both with pedantic enthusiasm, guaranteed to make the interviewer's eyes glaze within thirty seconds.

If Matt did his job right—and he always did—the interviewer had no suspicions about him at all. If Matt did his job right, the interviewer would always end the interview with, "You're exactly the kind of man we want playing Santa. Please go downstairs. They'll brief you on everything you'll need."

The mall that hired him as one of this year's rotating Santas was one of the oldest in Portland. It had five anchor stores, two stories, and a new wing. An atrium, with a high-domed glass ceil-

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ing, in the center of the mall provided the space for his little kingdom: a throne-sized chair with two large cushions, a giant Christmas tree—real, he soon learned, with that wonderful fresh scent—and a pile of presents stacked beneath it, each marked with a child's age and sex, each donated by a different store.

This place had spent a lot of money on the costumes too: no fake white fluff that had pilled or grown gray with time. White fur instead—not real, of course, but the kind that covered the best stuffed animals. The suits were red velvet, the beards and wigs from a men's costume shop that guaranteed authenticity. When Matt applied the spirit gum, he felt as if he were going to go on stage instead of into the sunlit atrium with a gaggle of kids waiting to sit on his lap.

His first day, the day after Thanksgiving, went well, as did his second and third. No baby peed on him, no frightened toddler kicked him in the wrong place, no angry parent returned demanding a different present for his precious little darling. Each night, Matt returned home—one of the hotels near the airport that catered to out-of-towners who rented by the week—and put his feet up on the presswood coffee table, feeling as if he'd had real human contact, as if things—for this one brief instant—were good once again.

He knew it was an illusion, and that come December 25th, the illusion would evaporate as if it had never been. Matt Sturtz would become someone else, would live somewhere else, and gradually lose the comfort the season had given him.

He knew all that, and he no longer minded. It was the rhythm of his life, the only tradition he had, and he valued it above all else.

On Tuesday, December first, the rain came down in sheets, and the bus driver, obviously new, struggled to keep the Metro on the slick roads. Drivers honked and cursed, pedestrians stood away from the curbs to keep from getting splashed, and Matt had to walk the last three blocks to make sure he was on time to work.

In the locker room, the previous Santa was hanging up his uniform. He was an older man, a grandfather, or so he said, who loved spending time with children. He grinned when he saw Matt close the filthy metal door and grab the handle of the dented locker the mall had provided him and his precious suit.

"Not a lot of business," the grandfather said, "but I'll bet it'll pick up tonight."

"It usually does," Matt said, and then turned his back as he pulled off his jeans. Some of the Santas wore their jeans under the suit, but the kids could always see that. By the time he had finished changing, the grandfather was gone.

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Matt applied his beard, moustache, and wig, always amazed that with the right facial hair he could look forty years older than he really was. He practiced the eye twinkle in the scratched mirror above the sink, then put on his cap, and let himself out of the locker room.

Here, in the mall proper, he was Santa. He walked with a joy he never had anywhere else. He smiled at children, and ho-ho-ho-ed on command. As he made his way past the decorated fake trees in the center of the mall, past the women with strollers, the men looking harried, he assisted in little ways. He helped catch a two-year-old who was on a shrieking, giggling tearaway from her father, who was trying to adjust the infant he carried in a neck sling. As the man tried to express his gratitude, Matt moved on. He caught a package that an overloaded businesswoman dropped, and then he was at his location.

The piped-in music in this part of the mall had class: Frank Sinatra singing "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," which, Matt knew, would be followed by Ella Fitzgerald wondering "What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?" He appreciated that. There were only so many Muzak renditions of "Jingle Bells" that a man could experience in one lifetime.

The throne was comfortable, and the elf, a middle-aged librarian with a knack for keeping people in line, grinned at him as he settled in. There was no line at the moment; there probably wouldn't be until parents got off work—most of the stay-at-home parents were preparing dinner—and it was too early for the last-minute shoppers to crowd the mall. He had an hour or more to keep himself occupied before the first real busy session started.

From the throne, he could see the nearby stores: the Lord & Taylor anchor store with its male and female dummies wearing Christmas evening wear, gold garlands around the windows, and expensive gifts under a very real, very large tree; the Musicland beside it, the window garish with red and green and white peppermint paper; the Waldenbooks on the other side, its display filled with coffee-table books that people would look at once and then never touch again.

He imagined having a gift list, shopping, as so many men did now, hurrying from his 9-to-5 for an hour at the mall before stopping for takeout Chinese on the way home. He wondered if he would have been that kind of husband, that sort of father, the one who was involved, who wore a baby in a sling around his neck while chasing a joyful toddler. He wondered, and felt the familiar twist in his heart, and then made himself think of something else.

If he turned ever so slightly in the throne, he could see the stores with the outdoor access: the photographer on the corner, advertising family portraits; the jeweler who specialized in dia-

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monds and easy credit; the beauty shop that also did nails. They were empty as well.

He suppressed a sigh and the elf grinned at him. It was an infectious grin with its own twinkle, and it made him wonder if she felt discriminated against, if she thought she could be as good—or better—a Santa than he could.

He smiled back, then glanced at the double doors at the other side of the Lord & Taylor store. Cars were cruising the rain-soaked parking lot. A van with bald tires screeched so loudly as it stopped that it nearly drowned out Ella. The man who got out of the passenger's side was little more than a boy, really, a teenager who had gotten his height, but hadn't gotten rid of the lanky gawkiness that marked him as a stranger in his newer, bigger body. He pulled his battered leather jacket around him as he ran into the jewelry store, pausing to look at the engagement rings in the display beside the window before going in where Matt could no longer see him.

Getting engaged at Christmas. All the hopes and dreams and special moments tied together. The twist again, so fierce that he had to turn away. He faced the main section of the mall, saw the father he had rescued, the baby now asleep against his chest, the little girl pointing at the tree. The father grinned at Matt, Matt grinned back, and suddenly, he was in business.

It was as if the magic held him in those hours, the heartwarming magic found only in hour-long TV shows and the annual holiday Disney movies. He could believe that each child who sat on his lap would go home to a large tree, with ample presents beneath, loving parents, a new year destined to be filled with only joy. The grubby hands pulling on his beard, the candy-soured breath whispering important secrets that usually showed the triumph of marketing in the American psyche, somehow gave him reassurance that in other homes, at least, something wonderful was happening, something he could share for a brief moment, and that, he assured himself, was enough.

Matt always insisted on telling his elf the child's wishes so that the elf could tell the parents when she handed out the present; that way he had done his duty as only Santa could. The hours went quickly, the eager faces blurred, and when the line finally dwindled to nothing, he felt a healthy exhaustion that he never got when he worked construction or got the odd bartending job.

He leaned back in his throne, glanced at his watch, and saw he had fifteen minutes until the mall closed.

"You didn't even take a break," his elf said. "I suppose you could now. I doubt we'll get anyone else."

In his mind's eye, he saw an imaginary tow-headed boy drag-

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ging his tired mother through the large mall, only to arrive at Santa's Village to find Santa's throne empty.

He smiled. "I can last fifteen more minutes."

"I'm not sure I can," she said and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. She had to move more than he did.

"Go," he said. "I doubt I'll get a rush."

She shook her head. "We're a team." She sat on the tiny red and green chair to the side of him, looking as if she would wilt before the shift was up.

He couldn't watch her or his own tiredness would overwhelm him. Instead he watched the stores closing: the Lord & Taylor employees waiting impatiently by their cash registers; the Waldenbooks manager dragging her display shelf inside the store; the last stragglers in Musicland. The photographer had closed an hour before, and the beautician just after dinner. Only the jewelry store had its display lights on and the door to the street open.

The van was parked outside, near a streetlight, its single unbroken taillight turning the rain red. Exhaust fumes floated like fog over the pavement, and Matt frowned as he watched. The boy apparently hadn't bought his ring yet, or was coming back for another look.

A different teenage boy appeared from the driver's side. He grabbed the silver handle on the van's back and pulled the door open. The interior light didn't come on, but the streetlight provided just enough illumination to reveal several shotguns, handguns, and some ammunition.

"What are you looking at?" Matt's elf asked.

"Get mall security," he said, rising as he did so, "and dial nine-one-one."

Maybe he was making things up. Maybe. But his instincts told him that this was too odd to be coincidental. And his instincts had been on more than off these past fifteen years. Besides, he knew something about teenagers, shotguns, and determination. He put the red velvet rope with the Santa Will Be Right Back sign across the edge of the line and walked to the jewelry store.

He didn't want to seem as if he was coming to the rescue. That could make things messy. Instead, he played a new role: Santa as Christmas shopper. As he walked past the giant tree, he carefully bent over and whispered to the woman who was sitting on the fake park bench to get out of the way, something bad was going to happen, and to, as inconspicuously as she could, make sure no one else was in this vicinity.

She frowned at him as if he were crazy, then she looked over his shoulder. She must have seen the boys in the haze of the streetlight for she nodded once, stood, and walked toward a couple nuzzling near the packages.

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The employee in the jewelry store, a slender woman whose hair was slipping out of its careful bun, was matching receipts to the cash register tape, an old-fashioned procedure not really necessary in these days of computers. Only a jewelry store would still continue that old-fashioned practice; it had high markup and low volume.

Outside, one of the boys slid his shotgun inside his open jacket. Matt made himself look away. He entered the jewelry store, whistling "Frosty the Snowman," and the clerk looked up, clearly startled. She opened her mouth, probably to tell him they were closing, when Matt smiled.

"Hello there!" Matt said in his jolliest voice. "I came to look at your engagement rings."

Without waiting for her response, he walked past the counter. "Get down," he whispered. "And look natural as you do it."

He didn't watch to see if she followed his instruction. Instead, he walked to the engagement-ring display with its garish Pay Nothing Until July! sign.

The other boy closed the back of the van and joined his partner. They headed toward the store.

Matt reached up and hit the button that activated the mesh gate. It started down, too slowly for his comfort. The boys looked startled, then one of them grinned, pulled open the outside door, and slid under the gate.

The other boy followed.

On the mall side of the store, a second gate fell. Matt hadn't planned on that.

"Trying to be a hero, Pops?" the first boy asked as he pulled the shotgun out of his coat.

The clerk gasped, and Matt yelled, "Get down!" in case she hadn't hidden already. The gates made it all the way to the floor, clanging, trapping them inside.

The first boy held the shotgun on Matt. "You don't do nothing, Pops, and everything'll be fine." He inclined his head toward his friend. "You," he said, smart enough not to use names, even though he didn't seem to care about hiding his acne-scarred face. "Get the stuff."

The second boy had a sack, a red velvet one that looked too similar to a Santa sack for comfort. He opened the display of diamond bracelets and began yanking them out.

Perhaps it was the bag. Perhaps it was the realization that these were boys, and inexperienced ones at that. Perhaps it was the knowledge that the clerk was safe, and whatever happened to Matt didn't matter. No one would care. No one would mourn. He was free to do as he wished, and what he wished was to stop this now.

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Adrenaline pumped through him. He moved quicker than he thought he ever could.

He grabbed the engagement-ring display case, and tossed it at the boy with the shotgun. The boy whirled, wasn't quick enough to shoot or get out of the way. The display hit him in the stomach and the gun fell out of his fingers, sliding on the red indoor-outdoor carpet.

Matt dove for the gun and came up holding it, feeling absurdly like Rambo in a Santa costume. Time had slowed to a crawl—only once before had time done that to him—and it felt like each breath, each movement took a year.

The clerk screamed, and Matt shouted at the second boy to "Hold it!" The boy looked up and, startled, dropped the sack. He reached for the handgun he had stuck in his waistband.

"Touch it," Matt said, "and I will shoot you."

The boy held out his hands and slowly raised them, Western-style. The other boy on the floor was struggling to get the display case off him, moaning as he did so, diamond rings scattered about him like shards of glass.

The sirens started first, coming closer and closer. Red and blue lights played across the cars outside, and Matt turned just enough to see mall security watching through the mesh. The clerk, who still clutched her receipts, had her mouth open, her lower jaw trembling as if she had palsy.

"Let them in," Matt said.

It took a moment for his command to register, but when it did, she used a different control to open the gate on the mall side. The security cop came in, carrying the handcuffs he'd probably never used. He looked at Matt for instruction, and Matt nodded at the standing boy first.

"He's got a gun," Matt said, and the guard slipped a tentative hand around the boy's waist, grabbed the gun with two fingers, and, without taking his gaze off the boy's face, stepped backwards to set the gun on the counter.

For a moment Matt thought the boy would make a lunge for it, but he glanced at Matt and apparently didn't like what he saw there, so he didn't move. The first boy didn't seem to notice. The display had injured him somehow. He had stopped trying to move it, and had lain down in the position he had been in, still moaning quietly.

The red and blue lights filled the interior of the store, winking garishly off the diamonds, making Matt feel suddenly as if he were in a badly designed disco. The guard grabbed the boy and cuffed him, then the real cops came in the mall side and took over, now that it was too late.

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Two hours of storytelling in the manager's office, sitting in the only comfortable chair, looking at the out-of-date notices on the bulletin board flapping in the breeze coming out of a poorly placed heating duct. The cops who took his statement were sympathetic: They were the ones who had come on the scene, and they praised him for his quick thinking, his decision to trap the robbers, his whispered instructions to the elf, the customers, the clerk. But they said, because they had to, because it was true, sometimes things don't end so well. Sometimes the boy with the gun knows how to shoot, sometimes a well-pushed display case isn't very heavy at all, sometimes the other boy pays attention. You could have died, she could have died, and for what? Some franchise's diamond jewelry, which probably was insured anyway.

Matt nodded, listened, didn't defend himself, thinking not of the jewelry but of the weapons he'd seen in the van, the reports he'd been hearing too often lately about teenagers and guns, and the way they used them, not as tools, but as machines for slaughter. He hadn't been protecting jewelry; he'd been protecting the smiling baby who had grabbed his spirit-gummed beard and tried to chew it; the little girl who had laughed with her father with such complete joy. He had been protecting the small throne and the Ella Fitzgerald Christmas carols, and the gray light coming in from the atrium windows. He had done it without thinking, and now that he could think, he knew he would do it all over again.

The cops must have seen the determination on his face, for they tried to reassure him. He had done well; he would be a hero; the boys were in custody. The robbery fit a pattern that had started a few weeks before, and even though the robberies were brazen, no one had been able to catch the thieves. They might stop now, after a taste of prison, a taste of pain, one of the cops said, and laughed. The display case had probably broken the kid's pelvis, and no man ever forgot that.

Matt waited until they were done, was cordial and kind until they dismissed him, and then went to the locker room to put on his street clothes. For the first time since he had quit five years before, he longed for a cigarette. The destructive impulse made him sadder than it should have, and he wondered what it was about the night that inspired him to make things worse.

That night he woke in a cold sweat, the smooth polished feel of a shotgun still heavy in his hands, the heat of the summer's day covering him, the sound of a woman's voice, pleading, still echoing in his ears. He sat up in his rented bed and blinked in the unfamiliar darkness, the dream slowly fading.

It wasn't a dream really: It was a memory as clear as if it had happened just that night. The tinkle of the bell over the conve-

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nience store's glass door, the sharp smell of cheap perfume and plastic, the way the clerk had looked at him—terror making her face rounder, her eyes bigger, her mouth a silly but perfect circle. He lifted his grandfather's shotgun to his shoulder and shot out the cameras—all of them a perfect bull's-eye—and then he had tugged his ski mask to make sure it was in place.

The clerk had screamed after each shot, and when he finally turned the gun on her—his foster father's voice echoing in his head, *Don't point a gun at anyone unless you mean to use it*—she had started pleading for her life: a single run-on sentence filled with spit and panic.

Don'tshootmemisterreallyI'lldoanythingyouwanthonestbutjust-pleasedon'tshootmepleasepleasedon'tshootme.

For five days he had cased the place, realized it was a mom-and-pop organization that didn't like to do bank runs. It had a safe in the back filled with the day's takings, probably fifteen hundred dollars, maybe more, a lot of money in 1984. He had planned carefully, wearing someone else's clothes, bought at a Goodwill fifteen miles away, boots three sizes too big, with a heel that made him seem inches taller. A wig beneath his ski mask, and a Southern accent, spoken in a voice lower than his usual.

Because she had been so terrified, because he hadn't expected that, because he realized at the moment he stared down his gun at her that they both knew he could kill her, he took the money. Then he ripped out the phone and made her lie down, telling her to wait until he had been gone fifteen minutes before she went for help. He set a wind-up toy on the floor and let it shuffle around so that she would think he was still in the store, then he slipped out the back door, the manager's door. He had a car waiting around the block—stolen that afternoon off a car lot in the same town as the Goodwill. He'd hot-wired the car and left it running, figuring if someone else took it on a joyride it would be no big deal, might even get him off the hook.

But it was there waiting for him, its exhaust rising like fog in the streetlights. He got in, removed his mask and wig, placed them in a plastic bag, put the money with them, and drove the car back to the lot. He replaced the $800—Like New! sign and walked away as if he had never taken the car. His truck was parked behind a library a mile away. He walked awkwardly in the big boots. When he got to the truck, he slid into the cab, removed the boots, changed clothes, and threw the Goodwill clothes in the plastic bag. Then he removed the money, put it in an envelope, and stuck it in the glove box. He put a brick in the bag and tied it closed.

He drove all night, and the next day, just before dawn, as he was about to cross the Ohio River in Evansville, he took a side road, found a bridge no one was near, and chucked the plastic bag

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over the side. Then he drove back to the main highway and crossed into Kentucky, a new man. A man who had had nerve. A man who had stolen from someone else.

A man who could have killed if his finger had slipped.

He kept the money for two days, spreading it on the seat of his truck, never counting it, wearing gloves every time he touched it despite the August heat. And finally, he realized he'd never be able to spend it or add to it, that for the rest of his life he'd see the clerk's round face, her big eyes, and her silly circle of mouth, and know that for a few thousand dollars he had nearly taken her life.

In Cairo, he put the money in an envelope and mailed it back to the convenience store—its address burned in his brain from his five days of study, the 152 painted in black above the door like a neon sign every time he closed his eyes. He drove on to Memphis and told his first real lie to get his first honest job, and never looked back.

He had thought it would be easy money. But he hadn't realized he was still paying for it, even now.

He wrapped his arms around his knees, felt the thin rubbery blanket beneath the flesh of his forearms, the industrial smell of the sheets tickling his nose. No one was looking for him. The clerk would remember. He did. And maybe the mom-and-pop owners thought of that one time they'd been robbed. But no one else did. The cops who had worked the case were probably long gone.

He watched the true-life mystery shows and all the real-life cop dramas and never once had he seen the brief image of his own body standing in that convenience store, pointing his grandfather's shotgun at the camera.

Still, because of tonight's heroics, he toyed with packing his bags, getting into the new truck, the one he'd had for the last year, and heading down I-5. It was still early. Maybe they were hiring Santas in Eugene, or Roseburg, or even in California.

But he couldn't do that. He finally understood what kind of peace he had shattered that night so long ago. He finally understood that he had done more than point a gun at a woman and break a few laws. He had violated something else, someone's dream, perhaps, or a woman's illusion of safety.

He had been a punk kid, whose parents had died when he was twelve, and who his various foster parents believed was responsible enough to need very little supervision. A punk kid with a shotgun and an attitude, who figured he didn't need to work for anything, that he was smarter than all the rest—hadn't he graduated with straight As in high school without doing any work? He'd figured the criminals who got caught were the ones who hadn't paid attention to the details, and he was determined to make it rich by thinking.

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Only he hadn't. He hadn't done any thinking at all.

Perhaps that burst of anger in the jewelry store hadn't been aimed at two teenage boys violating a mall with guns and a Santa bag. Maybe the anger had been at a single teenage boy who thought he could have the easy life by staking out a place, picking up a shotgun, and taking money from people who had spent long dirty hours earning it.

Maybe, just maybe, he had come a lot farther than he thought.

The next morning, he dressed early and stared at his bags, refusing to let himself pack them. He went to the mall on time, saw, as he got off the bus, the vans decorated with the logos of all the local news channels. Inside, a crowd of cameras studied Santa's Village, but didn't film the grandfather. Instead, they were waiting for Matt.

He hesitated. They didn't recognize him in his street clothes. He could turn around and leave, and no one would be the wiser. Then, of course, someone would investigate his resume, realize that there was no Professor Sturtz at Gustavus Adolphus, and the entire story would turn bizarre in the space of an afternoon.

The jewelry store was open; the sole employee had the official, rumpled look of a manager facing more stress than he expected. The damaged display had been placed behind the counter, but a cameraman was asking, rather loudly, that the display be moved back to its original location.

Matt bit his lower lip, then felt a hand on his arm. The mall manager smiled uncertainly at him and said, "They want you in the Santa suit, if that's all right."

Matt nodded, then felt some of the tension leave his shoulders. Not that he was worried about being caught—whatever happened, happened—but because he was worried about ruining this moment for everyone else. Every now and then a mere mortal, dressed as Santa, did something spectacular. It helped the kids believe. It brought a smile to the face of weary parents. It gave the season a shining layer of gold.

He changed into his suit, made an appearance, and let the cameras turn their shiny lenses on him while the reporters asked questions, posed him in the scene of the crime, in the village, with a volunteer child. He smiled and laughed and waited patiently until it was all done, and when they finally left to find another human-interest tale or to chase an ambulance, he winked at his elf—a different woman from the night before—and asked if she was ready to get back to business. She was.

The children filed through, the Polaroids were snapped, gifts were given. He held each wriggling little body as if it were more precious than diamonds, and he made sure each little wish was passed on, just as he had before.

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It had been this that had changed him, this small tradition, seeing how important it was to each child, each parent, waiting patiently in his line. His life had been empty, purposely, except for this one tradition, this single month where he was at his best. Somehow that had pushed him farther, made him do more than he ever thought he could.

He would still wander away from Portland, and Matt Sturtz would disappear forever. But there was an old name, nearly forgotten, a real name that could be dusted off along with dreams and goals, and perhaps the person who owned that name could find a way of contributing more than a merry laugh, a few empty promises, and a jolly red suit.

He had a few weeks to think about how he would do that, what would be his best plan. And no matter what he actually did—whether he went back to that tiny Midwestern town and confessed or whether he found another way to pay for his sins—he knew that when he gave the suit back, he wouldn't wait until next Thanksgiving to become the person he wanted to be. He wouldn't let the season fade. He would work at keeping the shine every day of the coming year. ●

A MURDER MYSTERY
by Pat D'Amico

The butler was stifling a chuckle;
The widow was laughing out loud;
The corpus delicti
Who hung by his necktie
Was drawing a big beaming crowd.

The maid who was doing the dishes
Was snickering into the suds;
The gardener and pool man
Were shouting, "That's cool, Man!"
And toasting each other with "Buds."

One could guess that the victim was cranky,
Obnoxious, offensive, or rude—
But the cops can't begin
To find who did him in
Till they tone down the jubilant mood.

Poem ©1999 by Pat D'Amico

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HOME IS THE PLACE

by Joseph Hansen

It's been over ten years since Joseph Hansen last appeared in *EQMM*—an interval far too long to suit us. Many readers will know Mr. Hansen as the author of the Dave Branstetter mysteries, which have readers not only in the U.S. but in Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, and Japan. The author's new story for us features another appealing character, his P.I. Bohannon, and he treats us to a case that's a real whodunit.

The light was poor. It was early morning and fog hung in the pines of Settlers Cove. But as he rounded a bend in the road, Hack Bohannon saw the gray shapes of three men cross up ahead. The hats told him two were sheriff's deputies. The lumbering prisoner was Clay Gilmore, a coach at the high school. The deputies opened a rear door for him and he folded into the car. The officers got in, doors slammed, and the car came toward Bohannon and passed, heading for the Coast Highway. Lieutenant Phil Gerard drove. The deputy in the backseat was named Vern. Bohannon lifted a hand to them. Gerard touched his hat and looked grim.

Bohannon parked his battered green pickup in front of the Gilmore house, a hulking dark box in the fog. He climbed a slope among ferns and poison oak under trees with rags of fog caught in their branches, nodded to the bulky young deputy, Lundquist, stationed at the front door, and went along the side of the house to the rear, where he found a tall plank gate half open, and stepped into a patio with a large swimming pool that was empty except for dry brown pine needles. They'd piled up. The pool hadn't held water in a long time.

There was a story to that. He knew part of the story. Everybody did. But nobody knew the end of it. Or hadn't until this morning, about three-thirty, four o'clock. One panel of a sliding-glass door at the back of the house stood open and fog had crept into the room, but he knew whose the trim figure was that stood there—Deputy T. Hodges. "Morning," he said, stepped inside, twitched

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her a half smile, and looked at what lay at her feet. If he hadn't been told different, Bohannon would have thought the body sprawled there was that of an old man.

He crouched beside it. In spite of ugly dark splotches on forehead, cheek, and jawline, the face was a very young man's. Bohannon touched the thin black leather of the jacket. The shoulder and arm inside were wasted like those of an old man sick and dying. A bullet had gone through the leather right at the sternum. A little blood had seeped from the entry wound, but not much. Death had been quick: When the heart stops, so does the bleeding.

He looked up at T. Hodges, who had jangled the alarm-bell phone in his stables before sunup, as he was making the horses ready for the day, and asked him to come here. Though young, T. Hodges had been in law enforcement for years and wasn't, as a rule, shaken up by murder, though it was far from common in her bailiwick here on California's picture-postcard central coast. But her eyes glistened now with what he figured to be tears.

"Belle still not here?" He meant the wry old woman doctor who grudgingly served as district medical examiner. "It's been hours."

"Maybe she had horses to look after, too." T. Hodges tried for a smile but failed. She gazed again at the boy. "His name is Charles Gilmore—Chico, his father calls him. Called him. Age twenty-six. Last known place of residence, San Francisco. He wasn't expected home."

"No?" With a grunt, Bohannon got to his feet. "Well, the shooter didn't let surprise spoil his aim. Right through the heart. Find the weapon?"

She shook her head. "We'll search the woods once it's light."

"No bullet?"

"It could be under him," she said. "Or in him."

"Right." Bohannon looked around the floor, wanting the glint of a shell casing. There was ample dust, but no shell casing. The room had a pair of raveled green wicker chairs and a green wicker couch. An old white enameled chest of drawers with flaking Donald Duck decals. No books, magazines; no pictures on the walls, just faded rectangles where they'd once been. No one cared about this room now, any more than they cared about the swimming pool.

The door of a closet was ajar. He looked in. A lumpy blue canvas backpack hunched on the floor. A zipper was open on one of its pouches and little white-capped amber plastic vials, the kind that hold prescription medications, had tumbled out. Bohannon didn't touch it. He had long ago quit sheriffing. He had a private-investigator's license but no status here. She had asked him to come. He loved her, and he had come. "Anyone search this bag?"

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"I left it for you. You'll read it better. I cleared it with the lieutenant."

With a grunt, he picked it up, set it on the bed, opened the zippers one by one, and took everything out. It was pathetic. The sexy bikini briefs were ragged, the elastic gone, the bright dyes too. Same for the net skivvy shirts. All of it was very clean and smelled of Clorox. Cheap white dimestore socks. Two pairs of jeans. Three shirts. Shapeless sweaters that had cost a lot once long ago.

In one pocket of the backpack were papers that showed Charles Gilmore had sold his life insurance to a company that had then doled money out to him on the odds that he would soon die, a company pretty sure it could not lose, a company of such compassion it made you want to weep.

There were sad receipts. He had sold his car, a late-model Lexus, a pair of Mapplethorpe photographs, his sound system, his forty-inch television set, his part-ownership in a sailboat. A bundle of paycheck stubs showed he had left his job at a brokerage eight months ago. They'd given him big separation pay, but his medical bills—hospitals, laboratories, pharmacies—had been bigger.

Bohannon poked around. There was a scuffed and faded children's picture book, *Fletcher & Zenobia,* but there were no personal letters. Stranger still, no snapshots. Not from here, not from San Francisco. He was leaving a big part of his life behind—friends, events—yet he hadn't brought reminders of any of it. Why not? Bohannon sighed and stuffed everything back. Except the book. The book he handed to T. Hodges. "What do you make of that?"

"I'll read it," she said.

Bohannon said, "He wasn't just sick, he was broke."

T. Hodges gave him a crooked little smile. "And 'home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.'"

"Robert Frost," Bohannon said. "Well, not even he was right all the time."

Another door showed him a dusty little bathroom with a toilet, basin, shower stall. No towels on the racks. Nothing in the rust-flecked medicine cabinet but a long-ago toothbrush. He came out again.

Charles Gilmore's worn Nikes lay on the floor beside the couch. The faded cushions on the couch showed he had been lying there, but not at the time he was shot. When he was shot, he had been standing. That was plain from where he lay now, how he lay.

Bohannon lit a cigarette. "Gerard arrested the father, right? Clay?"

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"Did he have a choice? There were only two people in the house, Hack, the dead one and the living one. As the lieutenant sees it, if it wasn't deliberate murder, then Clay heard a noise, grabbed a gun, ran out here, and in the dark shot what he thought was an intruder."

"And what's Clay's version?"

"He didn't know Chico was here. Assumes he arrived late, very late, found the house dark, didn't want to wake his parents, and just sacked out here. Clay's sleep was broken by shouts and a shot. He stumbled out of bed, ran back here, found Chico dead, went to the phone in the kitchen, and dialed nine-one-one. Didn't shoot anybody, doesn't even own a gun."

Bohannon said, "His son's been gone must be eight, nine years. What was he, seventeen? It was about swimming. The kid was going to be on the Olympic team. It was in all the papers. His father was his trainer and he was proud. Then all of a sudden the boy quit. Left town and never came back."

T. Hodges made a brief bleak sound. "He should have stuck with that."

Fingerprint powder was around the lock on the patio door. Bohannon squinted at the lock. "This hasn't been forced."

"Coach Gilmore says it's never locked. Anybody could just walk in."

"Could and presumably did," Bohannon said. "Who? And why? Was it a mugging? Did they take anything?"

"His wallet was in his jacket. Twenty-nine dollars in it."

"That so?" Bohannon pushed back his old Stetson and peered upward. The fog still hung in the pines. The ocean was downhill a short way through the woods. Waves thudded. A sea lion barked. Bohannon took a last drag on the cigarette, stepped outside, dropped it, ground it out under a straw-caked boot. He turned back. "And Clay claims nobody knew he was coming?"

"It could be true. We searched the house for letters. Didn't find any. And there's no computer."

"Phone records being checked?" Bohannon said.

"Here and in San Francisco," she said. "The coach also claims he didn't know anything about his son's life since he left home, how he lived, where he lived, who his friends were." She made a face. "He didn't want to know, Hack. He didn't say that, but it was obvious."

Belle Hesseltine banged in at the patio gate, tall and gaunt and grumpy, in jeans, sheepskin jacket, cowboy hat. "Sorry. Triplets in a shack. Mexican illegals. They didn't send for help. Scared to." She marched toward them, soldier straight and grim of face. "Neighbor finally ran to the gas station and phoned."

"Triplets," T. Hodges said. "Did you drive her to the hospital?"

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"Too late for that. But mother and young are doing well. Three brand new American citizens." She laughed. "I filled out the birth certificates. That made the parents happy. Whole reason they came, poor things." She stopped short and scowled down at the dead youngster. "AIDS," she said, and looked at T. Hodges. "Those lesions on his face. Kaposi's sarcoma. You didn't tell me he had AIDS."

"It's not what killed him," Bohannon said.

The old woman set down her kit. "I hope you didn't touch the body."

Bohannon ignored that and asked T. Hodges, "Isn't there a mother? Real-estate agent? Celia, that her name? Where is she in all this?"

"At her sister's in Santa Barbara. There's a sick child, and the sister is divorced and has to work. So Celia is down there keeping things together for a few days. I've called her, told her there's been an accident. She's coming home."

"You didn't let on who the accident happened to?"

She tightened her mouth. "Hack, I didn't just fall off the turnip truck."

"Sorry," he said.

"She thought it was Clay," T. Hodges said. "She thought he was dead."

Belle Hesseltine pulled on latex gloves and dropped to her bony old knees beside the body. "Get out of here, you two," she said. "Let me do my work."

"When you roll him over," Bohannon said, "look for a bullet."

The old woman zipped open the black jacket, apologetically, as if it were an intrusion. "If it had gone through him, there'd be blood and tissue splashed around." She unbuttoned the boy's shirt. His chest was parchment stretched over a rack of bones. The entry wound was small and neat. The neatness made it obscene. She touched it. "Poor child," she murmured.

Bohannon raised his eyebrows. "The doctor has a heart."

"I thought I asked you to get out of here," she snapped.

They got out and met a skinny bespectacled boy and a hefty Latina girl in green coveralls, coming with a gurney and a body bag. Bohannon thought to himself, not for the first time, that he ought to stop labeling these adults boys and girls. It was a mark of growing old, and he was only fifty-six. He said to T. Hodges, "How long are you stuck here? When can I take you to breakfast?"

"The lieutenant will be back with Vern to look for the gun now that it's daylight, but he'll want me to wait for Celia. He'll want me to break it to her. Woman to woman. It's how he thinks."

"Right," Bohannon looked at his watch. "When did you notify her?"

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"Four, a few minutes after." T. Hodges gave a little shiver. "Come on. The lieutenant had me make coffee earlier. Woman's work, you know. Maybe there's still some left. Kitchen's this way." The coffee pot was empty: Lieutenant Gerard and Clay Gilmore had sat here a good while, talking. Bohannon threw away the grounds and made fresh coffee. T. Hodges sat at the table and read *Fletcher & Zenobia.* The only sound in the room was the grumbling of the coffee maker. Bohannon carried filled mugs to the table and sat down across from her. She closed the book.

"What's it about?" he asked.

"A cat and a Victorian doll who have a party with cake and balloons and funny hats high up in a big old tree." She frowned, turning the book over. "I don't know what kind of child it was written for."

"Doesn't sound like a clue," Bohannon said.

And Belle Hesseltine came in and set down her kit.

"Coffee?" Bohannon stood up.

"I'd say the bullet's lodged in a bone." The old woman took a seat. "Rib or vertebra. It stopped his heart while he was still standing." She watched Bohannon set the mug in front of her. "We'll get it out at the lab. Then we'll know more." With a bony, age-spotted hand, she waved away the waxed cardboard carton of cream Bohannon offered. She saw a question in his eyes before he asked it. "No. Not a rifle. It wasn't some dimwitted deer hunter's miss."

"Rifles are commoner than pistols in these parts," he said.

She nodded, tried the coffee, burned her mouth, but held the steaming mug instead of setting it down. She wanted the coffee. "You'll find the handgun in the woods, I expect. About the distance Clay Gilmore could throw it. He reported the shooting right away. Body temperature shows that. He didn't take time out to drive down and throw it in the ocean."

Jittery metallic rattling came past the kitchen window. They saw the heads of the ambulance pair go by. It was the wheels of the gurney with Chico Gilmore's body on it that rattled. That was below eye level. It continued on until it was out of hearing.

Belle Hesseltine tried her coffee again. "Don't mourn, you two," she said. "He hadn't much longer to live."

"Maybe that makes it even sadder," T. Hodges said.

"It was clean and quick," the old woman said. "AIDS is not. His suffering is over. Years of it, by the look of him." She drank a little more coffee. "He wasn't losing his life. Not what anybody'd want to call a life. All he had left was agony."

T. Hodges stared. "You think it was a mercy killing? You think his father did it to put him out of his misery? An act of kindness?"

The doctor didn't answer that. Her faded blue eyes were regard-

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ing Bohannon with a wry twinkle. "Go ahead, have your smoke. You've touched that pocket five times in the past two minutes. I'm leaving." She set the coffee mug down and stood up. "I have to find the bullet that's hiding in that boy." Her mouth twitched grimly, she picked up her kit, pulled open the door, and stepped outside.

And not far off, in the silence of the pines, a woman screamed.

"Oh, God." T. Hodges threw Bohannon a panicked look.

He laid a hand on her arm. "Take it easy." He got to his feet and told the blank-faced doctor, "That will be the victim's mother. She was out of town."

The lean old woman studied T. Hodges. "You stay here and collect yourself. I'll take care of it." And she started off at a stiff, long-legged stride. The screaming kept up, hysterical, broken by hoarse sobbing.

A young man's voice, panicky, ready to crack, yelled: "Hodges, where are you?" And Lundquist came running, dodging past Belle Hesseltine. He stopped in the kitchen doorway, red-faced, breathing hard. "Hodges, will you get out here, please? It's Mrs. Gilmore. She zipped open the body bag before I could stop her." He waved an arm toward the shrill crying. "She's going crazy."

"Right away," T. Hodges said, and went to him, and they trotted together out of Bohannon's window view, along the side of the house toward the front. Belle Hesseltine followed. Frowning to himself, Bohannon lit a cigarette, gulped some coffee, and trudged after them. He watched them run slipping down the ferny slope between pines to the crooked, hilly road, and across the road to where the green-clad youngsters were trying to slide the gurney into the rear of the county ambulance. A middle-aged woman, shouting, "No, no, no," clutched at them. "You can't take him. Don't you understand? He's my son, my son. This is where he belongs. He's just come home."

Now T. Hodges and Lundquist caught hold of the woman. She stared at them, wild-eyed for a moment, then went limp, whimpering, seeming to give up. The ambulance pair slammed shut the rear doors, ran, and climbed into the cab. The doors banged, the engine roared. Celia Gilmore surprised the deputies, broke away from them, ran to the front of the ambulance, and threw herself on the hood. "No, no. You can't have him, you can't have him. He's mine. He's all I have. I've waited so long."

The deputies caught her again and dragged her to the brushy far side of the road and the ambulance roared off. The woman was struggling, keening, mad with grief. She stretched her arms out after the departing ambulance. Bohannon had glimpsed her often in the town, a good-looking woman, well groomed, well dressed, younger than her years, bright, brisk, businesslike. Not this morning. This terrible morning she was wild-haired Naiobi, weeping

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for her child, older than a thousand centuries, as old as motherhood itself.

"Come on," Belle Hesseltine said grimly. "She's a danger to herself. Or making a damned good show of it. In either case, I'll give her a shot to knock her out." She started down the slope. Worried that she might fall, he tried to take her arm, but she wouldn't let him. The Gilmore woman began screaming and struggling again. With a short, dry laugh, Belle Hesseltine said, "Do you know what they told me when I moved here to retire?"

"Sure," Bohannon said. " 'Nothing ever happens in Settler's Cove.' "

Otis Jackson had come to work for Bohannon when George Stubbs was still alive and in need of care. Jackson, a hefty, good-humored young black man, was working as a rent-a-nurse, swatting the books and saving his money for medical school. When Stubbs died, Bohannon, desperate for help that wouldn't walk out on him after a few days, weeks, months, coaxed Otis into staying on as his stable man. The pay was minimal, all Bohannon could afford, but room and board were free and the job would leave him time to study, so Jackson had agreed. But he'd never been near a horse in his life before and was still a little spooky around them, and Bohannon was spooky at leaving him in charge of things for long. Horses could panic over nothing, and if a horse panicked, Otis might panic.

So, once Celia Gilmore was sedated and an ambulance had come to get her to the hospital in Los Osos, T. Hodges riding there with her to wait to question her when she woke up, Bohannon headed for his pickup truck. But as he opened the door, a shout stopped him. "Where you going?" He looked. Phil Gerard had just rolled up in the patrol car with Vern.

"Back to minding my own business." Bohannon ambled over to him.

"That would be a novelty," Gerard said. He opened the trunk of the patrol car. Rakes lay there. They looked fresh from the hardware store. He handed one to Vern and one to Bohannon. "But for a change, this morning I'm going to be grateful for your help." He got a rake for himself, slammed the trunk closed, and started toward the Gilmore house. "That gun is out there in back someplace. We have to find it."

Bohannon and Vern trailed after him. Bohannon said, "According to Hodges, Clay Gilmore didn't own a gun."

"Technically the truth," Gerard said, climbing through the ferns, looking at the ground as he walked, maybe thinking the gun could be out here in front. The fog had pretty well dispersed now but dampness dripped from the trees. "It wasn't his. It was his wife's. She bought it a year ago after she unlocked the front door of a

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property to show it to some prospective buyers and surprised housebreakers at work."

"Hah," Bohannon said. "And you think it was here in a dresser drawer?"

"People at Principal Realty say at first she kept it in her desk there, took it with her in the car when she showed houses, but nobody's seen it or heard about it for months now."

They trailed along the side of the house. "She got a computer there?" Bohannon asked.

"Yes, and a Deputy Bruce Busby from San Luis is checking it out, looking for e-mail to or from Charles Chico Gilmore in San Francisco. To see if Mom knew Junior was planning to come home. Because Mom could have told Pop, right?" He grinned at Bohannon over his shoulder. "I'm on top of this, Hack. Been a long time since we were partners. Try not to worry about me, okay?"

Bohannon stopped at the open gate. "That swimming pool's got a lot of duff in it. Must be two feet deep. Be the handiest hiding place for the gun."

"Check that, will you, Vern?" Gerard said, and took Bohannon with him into the trees. He said, "This isn't going to be a big challenge. What is it, an acre?"

"Half an acre," Bohannon said, and stepped in something sticky. "Wait. Look at this." Gunk was on his boot, and flies were buzzing around the gunk.

"Somebody threw up here," Gerard said.

"Killing takes some of us that way," Bohannon said, and scraped his boot on a tree trunk to try to clean it. "It wasn't the coach. He'd have thrown up in his own bathroom."

"Not if he came out here to get rid of the gun," Gerard said.

"He didn't." Bohannon ran his gaze along the ground. For a couple of yards footprints showed. Spaced far apart. Somebody running. He pointed at them and Gerard saw them and understood what they meant.

"It wasn't Clay Gilmore. He must wear size thirteens." The lieutenant scratched his cheek. He'd had no time to shave this morning. "Well, we'd still better try to find the gun. If the killer was so disgusted with himself he threw up, he also probably threw the gun away."

They spent forty minutes raking among the ferns and brush beneath the pines. Methodically. Marking off the areas covered one by one until they reached the side road and back road that bordered the property. Bohannon sat on a stump, lit a cigarette, and, when Gerard walked across to him from where he'd finished off raking, nodded toward a dark shiny spot on the ragged paving.

"Some car with an oil leak parked here lately," he said.

"What sharp eyes you have, Grandma," Gerard said.

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"He kept the gun," Bohannon said. "Drove off with it. In an old car."

"But who, for God's sake? It makes no—" Gerard's beeper sounded. "Gotta call in," he said.

Bohannon stood up, stepped on his cigarette, and went with him. As they passed the plank gate, Vern joined them. "No gun down there. Banana slugs, though. You ever see one? They're beautiful. Bright yellow. Great big. Eat decaying vegetation." He laid the rakes back and closed the trunk of the patrol car while Gerard used the two-way radio. It crackled and buzzed and Lundquist's voice came out. "Doc Hesseltine recovered the bullet, Lieutenant. It's a thirty-two. Same as the gun Mrs. Gilmore bought."

"Ten four," Gerard said, hung the radio up, and looked at Bohannon. "I know how your mind works. Like a chainsaw. Hack, it wasn't Mrs. Gilmore."

"Because she doesn't drive a leaky old car?" Bohannon said.

"She was in Santa Barbara." Gerard peered at him, disbelieving. "You like her for it? Aw, Hack. She was heartbroken. You saw her, you heard her."

Bohannon shrugged. "After she zipped open the body bag."

"She expected it to be Clay. She didn't know the son had come home."

"Then why open the bag?" Bohannon said. "Phil, she knew he was coming. It wasn't grief that made her scream. It was rage."

"Oh, boy!" Gerard snorted, and drove away with Vern.

He kept Otis Jackson watching him, leaning on the rail fence of the oval where kids, mostly horse-crazy girls, were taught to ride, while he conducted the lessons. George Stubbs used to do this. And Manuel Rivera. Now Stubbs was dead and Rivera had long since become a priest. And Bohannon himself was losing patience with the chore. The delight and fear and joy and despair and all the other emotions so near the surface in children that accompanied the lessons gave him a happy sense of aliveness that any honest man past fifty knew full well he was slowly losing. But it was wearying too. He'd be glad when Otis got over the idea that he couldn't do it and took over for him. Otis had bought himself a white cowboy hat. That was a good sign, Bohannon hoped.

And he had mastered saddling and unsaddling the horses, and most of the arcana of keeping their equipment and quarters clean and well ordered, and the horses themselves curried, fed, watered, and contented. He had even got less visibly uneasy in the saddle, and would soon be out on the canyon trails leading the Saddle Seniors group on their Saturday morning outings. Most riders who rented his mounts went off on their own. Now, leading Stanton Criss around on her palomino, teaching her what to do with

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the reins when she wanted the pretty little filly to step over a length of telephone pole laid in the way, Bohannon suddenly had a recollection of coach Clay Gilmore coming here to ride, bringing his young son, eight, ten years old. A long time ago. The boy had been afraid of the horses, paralyzed by fear. His father had laughed at him, called him a little girl, bullied him. It was an ugly memory.

"He's still that way," T. Hodges said. She had come up to the ranch house at sundown, after her shift ended, for supper, as she often did. Tonight, though, she hadn't done the cooking. Otis had. Ham, beans and rice, collard greens, corn bread. They were all three gathered at the big round deal table in the plank-walled kitchen, while the slanting daylight turned to gold and crimson outside the windows. "Celia says he hated the boy until he learned to swim. It was the only sport he took to. And he was brilliant. His father forgave him all his earlier failings, what he regarded as failings. And Chico was so amazed to be doing something at last that his father took pride in that he doubled and redoubled his efforts to be good at it, to be the best."

"And here was a son his father could be proud of?" Otis said.

"Exactly. Until it all went sour. Very suddenly."

"Did his mother give you the particulars of that?" Bohannon asked.

She cheered, "Otis, I never liked corn bread till now. What did you do?"

He had a fine chuckle. "Just what my mama showed me."

"Isn't it great, Hack?" she said.

"If you eat it all up, how will I ever learn?" Bohannon's face sobered. "Did she give you the details on what happened between the boy and his father?"

"Only that somehow Clay found out Chico was gay. She claims not even to know how. The subject wasn't fit for women's ears. But it completely outraged him, and before he had time to come to his senses and realize that, gay or not, the boy still had the potential to fulfill his father's dream by starring on the U.S. Olympic team, he had thrown him out."

"And now, after nine years, he was coming home? Did he write to her and tell her how sick he was and how broke he was and that there was noplace for him to go and begging to be allowed to come home?"

T. Hodges grimly shook her head. "She says he wouldn't have done that. Chico wouldn't dream of coming anywhere near his father. Never. His father hated him, wished he'd never been born."

"And she thinks his father killed him?" Bohannon asked.

T. Hodges looked away at the windows and the view of the steep, grassy canyon walls with their rocky outcrops, grown shadowy now in the dying light. When she looked at Bohannon again,

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her eyes were wide and hurting, and her voice was low, and trembled a little. "Yes. She thinks he did that. She thinks he killed his own son, the minute the boy walked into the house."

Otis Jackson murmured shock and disbelief.

Bohannon asked, "With her gun?"

T. Hodges nodded. "She told me she brought it home from the office weeks ago, and it was in a dresser drawer. And, yes, Clay did know where it was."

"If she thinks that about him, why did she stay married to him?"

T. Hodges said: "She meant to leave him. That was why she went out and got her license and started selling real estate, to be self-supporting. Chico had filled Clay's life because he was going to be a celebrated athlete, a champion. Hers because she loved the boy. Probably too much. In the end, I guess, she found she needed Clay to fill the emptiness." She shrugged, with a wan half-smile. "Who knows? Why does the moon rise?"

Otis reached out and switched on the light in the middle of the table. It was a converted kerosene lamp with a domed red glass shade. It cast a gentle glow. They ate for a time in somber silence. Then Bohannon rose to collect the plates and take them to the sink. "What about phone calls? Chico never called home?"

"Never," T. Hodges said. "And home never called him. Not while he had a phone. Evidently he couldn't afford one the last few months."

"I'm not surprised. Lost his apartment too, did he?"

"San Francisco PD says he doesn't live there anymore. He checked out of the hospital two-three weeks ago. Where he went from there, nobody knows. When they get too sick to look after themselves, the officer told me, sometimes friends take them in. But it's our case, Hack. They were polite, but they're not going to do our legwork for us."

Otis hove up off his chair. "Who's for pecan pie?" he said.

Rodd Canyon was unreachable by television in the old days, and even after cable came in, Bohannon didn't bother with it. His days started early, and that meant he went to bed early. Prime time was sleeping time he couldn't spare. So he learned Clay Gilmore had been indicted for the murder of Charles Chico Gilmore only when Sorenson, the tall, towheaded fire warden, jounced into the yard in his red pickup around noon. The morning had been busy, with more than the usual number of customers wanting to ride the canyons this beautiful fall day. Bohannon was glad to take a break over coffee in the kitchen with Sorenson.

"Did they find the gun?" Bohannon said.

"Not that I heard, no."

"Then how can they indict him? There's no evidence."

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Sorenson got up lankily and peered into the refrigerator. "Wife's testimony."

"What?" Bohannon stared.

Sorenson set the remainder of Otis's pecan pie on the table and went for utensils and plates and brought them back. "She says he hated the boy because he was gay, threw him out of the house, said if he ever came back, he'd kill him."

"A man will say that," Bohannon said. "Doesn't mean he'll do it."

Sorenson sat down, cut wedges of pie, eased them onto two plates, slid one across to Bohannon. "Depends on what man you're talking about."

"How's that?" Bohannon reached for a fork.

"The county attorney's office dug something else up. Seems back in nineteen seventy-two, the coach hounded an English teacher called Morton Lowry. Thought up a rotten nickname for him. Jeered it at Lowry at a basketball game in front of the whole school. The kids took to using it to his face in class." Sorenson filled his mouth with pie, wagged his head, and hummed at how good it tasted. He washed the bite down with coffee and said, "Lowry finally went to the school administration and complained. They reprimanded the coach. But he didn't let it drop. Dug up a ten-year-old police record, multiple arrests in L.A., that proved Lowry was what Gilmore claimed, and Lowry got fired. Story was all over the news. With his picture. Finished him. Man would never get another job teaching school."

"That a fact?" Bohannon forked pie into his mouth.

"Clay Gilmore's got an obsessive hatred for gays. That's how the county attorney puts it. School administration denies it, of course. But two of the other coaches bear it out, not giving their names, of course. And the kids in the locker rooms. Kids these days. Gay bashing, they call it. And it is definitely uncool."

Bohannon drank some coffee. "The indictment won't stick. Somebody else murdered Chico Gilmore."

"Another crazy? Two of them in one case?"

"I don't think there's even one." Bohannon lit a cigarette.

"The kid was dying of AIDS, Hack. Who in their right mind would murder somebody like that? Anyway, his mother said nobody knew he was in town."

"And his mother is the soul of truth, right?"

"The county attorney thinks so," Sorenson said, and carried the plates to the sink. They clattered. "Good pie, thanks."

"Otis made it," Bohannon said. "Thank him on your way out."

Next morning, at twelve past nine, Bohannon came out the back door of the Madrone bank into the little parking lot and the long shadow of a gnarled old California oak that made parking awk-

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ward there. He headed for the green pickup with the horse head in a circle George Stubbs had painted on the door. And a siren hooted. Only for a second. He turned his head. T. Hodges, in her helmet, sat in a brown patrol car on the street. Bohannon cheered up—seeing her always had that effect on him. He edged between the big terra cotta pots of tough, spiky native plants that margined the parking lot and leaned in at the window on the passenger side of the car. "Everything all right?"

"All wrong," T. Hodges said. "After her deposition to the county attorney, Celia Gilmore went home. I know. I delivered her there."

"Don't tell me," Bohannon said, "let me guess. She's disappeared."

"In her gold Mercedes. I should have parked where I could watch without her seeing me, right? And stayed till Vern or Lundquist relieved me."

Bohannon nodded. "You know that. I know that. Gerard didn't order it because he trusts her."

"She didn't go back to her sister's in Santa Barbara. Nor into her office. Nobody saw her here in town, none of the stores. Not the service station. Not the bank, post office, laundromat. She buys her groceries at Lucky's in San Luis. No sign of her down that way. Yet she didn't pack for a trip, Hack. Closets full, dresser drawers."

Bohannon straightened up, pushed back his Stetson, stood frowning for a minute at the flag fluttering atop its pole in front of the post office, blue sky and tawny mountains beyond—then bent again. "She make any phone calls?"

"We've checked. She didn't touch the phone. That's strange in a way. You'd have thought she'd be making funeral arrangements, for one thing. And talking to relatives. Her mother lives with Celia's brother and his family in Wisconsin. Not one call."

Bohannon opened the car door and sat inside, leaving the door open. "She had to do something, see somebody, and right away. No time for anything else."

"See somebody?" T. Hodges watched him light a cigarette. "Oh, Hack. What are you thinking?"

"That somebody threw up in the woods behind the house right after Chico was killed, and that somebody had parked a car that left a fresh oil leak on the road back there, and that this somebody was known to Celia Gilmore."

She cried impatiently, "Hack, that's all speculation."

"Then where's the gun?" Bohannon blew smoke into the clear morning air. "Somebody has it. I vote for the man who ran away through the woods. And he had it because Celia Gilmore had given it to him."

"To kill the son she adored? Please. Can we get back to reality?"

"Sure. You said an expert checked out her computer at work. He didn't find any e-mail messages to or from Chico?"

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"Not a thing," T. Hodges said.

"One of you should go to San Francisco," Bohannon said. "This is not an open-and-shut case. Phil Gerard always settles for the obvious. I'm sure Chico's father didn't kill him, and you're sure his mother didn't. So who did? Chico Gilmore lived up there a long time, one third of his very brief life."

"It's his death we're working on," T. Hodges said. "That didn't happen in San Francisco."

Bohannon gave her a quick kiss and got out of the car. "Let me know when you find the missing mother."

"Hack." She leaned across and peered up at him anxiously. "She wouldn't have killed herself, would she?"

"You saw her last," he said. "How did she seem?"

"Steely. She is one strong lady. When I let her off at her house and offered to send a woman officer from San Luis to stay the night with her, she said there was no need, that she'd be all right. She'd rather be alone."

"Uh-huh." He stepped on his cigarette. "Too bad she didn't say where."

He crossed the highway into Settlers Cove and drove past the Gilmore house. Damn it, somebody ought to be posted here, keeping an eye out for the woman in case she returned. Her gold Mercedes was no place in sight. He drove up to the back road. No car. He braked and sat looking into the trees for a moment, then switched off the engine, got out, and tramped down to the house. He walked all around it, looking through the windows that weren't too high to look through. No sign of Celia Gilmore. Well, hell, it wasn't his business. Horses were his business.

And Otis wanted to bring the stable's accounts up to date today. Which meant Bohannon would have to look after the learners, the owners of horses who boarded, and the folks who came to ride. That was okay. He could handle all that. He couldn't handle paperwork worth a damn. And he counted himself lucky that Otis reveled in it. He blinked, frowning at the house again, sighed, trudged back through the woods, got into the pickup, and drove home to Rodd Canyon.

But it nagged at him the rest of the morning, the need to find out what the woman was up to, where she had gone, and why. It wasn't a trip she'd gone on, it was an errand—by his calculations an urgent errand. Maybe innocent, but then why hadn't she told anybody? Anyway, around a murder, innocence wasn't the factor you took for granted. Guilt was the factor. He kept busy until eleven-thirty or so, then stepped into the kitchen. Otis, wearing big horn-rimmed glasses, sat at the table, every inch of it covered—

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typewriter, calculator, ledger, ballpoints, staple gun, address-card files, stacks of bills payable, and outgoing statements.

"There's no room to eat anyway," Bohannon said. "And I've got something to tend to in town. Take over out here, will you please?"

"Right away." Otis began tidying up. "But we have to talk about some of these bills."

"I'll be back." Bohannon lifted a hand and was out the door.

The pickup was parked beside the stake truck and Otis's modest compact, under tall, rustling, ragged-barked eucalyptus trees between the green-trimmed white ranch house and the stables. As he climbed into it, he thought he was acting like a fool. Still, his unease went deep, and hunches had served him in the past. It didn't do to ignore them. They could come back to haunt you. The truck rolled out through the parted white rail gates under the arch with the cutout letters B O H A N N O N on top of it, onto the narrow, pot-holed canyon road. He reminded himself sternly that his hunches often as not came to nothing. Still, he kept on driving. Maybe Celia Gilmore would show up.

He parked the pickup down the street, where she wouldn't take alarm from it, and he did not sit on the front steps waiting for her. He went inside. Breaking and entering, Gerard would call it. But then, Gerard didn't need to know about this. Bohannon looked around. He went from neat kitchen to neat dining room to neat living room, just resting his eyes on the good furniture and carpets, the polished tables, sideboards, with their well-chosen nicknacks, the bookshelves, the pictures. Not surprisingly, the Gilmores had kept to separate bedrooms. Even separate bathrooms. He looked into a third bedroom, plainly Chico's before he'd turned into a pariah. His bed was still there, but storage cartons were piled on it. Discarded furniture cluttered the space. Spiders had made themselves at home. Mark Spitz in tiny swim trunks smiled from a poster on the wall. One of its corners had come loose and folded over. The mirror above the dresser was fogged by dust. Bohannon stepped out and closed the door.

He had saved Clay Gilmore's den for last. There were dozens of polished brass trophies on a mantelpiece and in glass-fronted cabinets, commemorating football, baseball, basketball, soccer, track, and swimming victories. Plaques hung next to the chimney. Clay Gilmore had been Dad of the Year in 1992, honored often by the Chamber of Commerce, Athletic Directors of California, the Presbyterian church, a long list. Framed, glassed photos covered the walls, of teams back to twenty-five years ago, Coach Gilmore standing massive and proudly smiling among them. Pennants and banners hung here and there, some bright, some faded by time. A remote control lay on a tufted leather couch next to a jazzy plastic

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bag of sunflower seeds. Bohannon switched on the television set. A sports channel. Clips of baseball home runs and dust-up slides into second base. Noisy. He switched it off.

And heard a car stop down on the front road.

Heart bumping, he crossed the living room to look out the windows. To see the car well was hard because of the trees and brush. But it looked like a van, and not your ordinary paint job. More like an old-time circus wagon. Now somebody was starting up the hill toward the house. He stepped back from the window and went to the front door and unchained and unbolted it and waited for steps on the front deck. But first a voice called:

"Fletcher? Are you here? It's Zenobia."

Bohannon felt dizzy for a second and then remembered the children's book he'd found in Chico Gilmore's pack and given T. Hodges to read. *Fletcher & Zenobia.* He'd looked idly at the pictures. They had made him smile. But he hadn't read the story for himself. Footsteps sounded on the stairs up to the deck and he opened the door.

A plump young woman stood there. She wore jeans and a safari jacket with a lot of pockets. Nothing odd about that. What was odd was her hat, a puffy yellow bonnet decorated with daisies. Something you'd find in a very old attic. But odder still was what she held in her hands, a cake, a big one, with raspberry-colored frosting. It bristled with green and blue candles, and it had to be heavy. She stopped and stared at him.

"Where's Chico?" she said.

"He's not home," Bohannon said. If he had to tell her where Chico was, she might drop the cake. He stepped out. "Here. Let me take that for you."

"It's not heavy." She handed it over. It wasn't real. It was papier-mâché and thick paint and something that made it glisten. She eyed him, a little frightened.

"Mr. Gilmore? She said you wouldn't be here."

"He's not. My name's Bohannon. I'm—house-sitting." He set the cake among potted geraniums on the deck rail. "Who are you?"

"Lettice Van Van," she said. "I'm Chico's friend from San Francisco. He was staying with me after he got out of the hospital. Before he decided to come home." She looked at the cake, blushed, snatched off the bonnet, and held it behind her. "We had a silly game we played. To cheer him up. He has AIDS, you see. He was Fletcher the cat, and I was Zenobia the Victorian doll, and we lived in a tree and we couldn't get down so we had a party with cake and ice cream and punch and waltzes on the phonograph." Her face changed. "I copied the cake from the illustration in the book. It's not a real cake. I never baked a real cake, but I'm a dab hand at papier-mâché. I'm a theater designer, you see—sets, cos-

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tumes. I copied Zenobia's costume for myself, and Fletcher's little embroidered jacket. I can sew, of course. I just can't bake. Anyway, Chico couldn't keep real cake down. But we did have our pretend parties. All by ourselves. Like loopy six-year-olds. Sometimes we'd laugh so hard we'd fall down. It was lovely."

"Why did he leave?" Bohannon said.

"He wanted his mother. He was regressing mentally, you know. That happens. Turning into a little boy. He wrote to her and said he needed her and wanted to come home but he was afraid of his father. And she telephoned, saying she was coming to him. But he said no, it was home he wanted, here, in these woods. He was born here, and he wanted to die here. He loved this place." She turned to look. "And I can see why. An enchanted forest by the sea. No wonder he was pining for it. And his mother. He always did miss her." She turned back to Bohannon with a frown. "Isn't she here, either? What's happened? Did she take Chico to the hospital? Where? Tell me how to get there."

"He's not in the hospital," Bohannon said.

"He was very sick. The plan was that he'd fly down next week, on the twenty-fifth. But he had a terrible night on Sunday." A wooden bench was built along the railing of the deck. As if suddenly weary, she sat down on it. "And Monday morning he said to me, 'Lettice, I have to go home now. If I wait, I'll be too weak.' I reminded him she'd said she wasn't ready.

"'If it spoils her surprise party or something, I can't help it,' he said. He was desperate. But it took all day to get him ready. He had to keep resting. It was long after dark when I drove him to the airport and put him on an SWA flight to Fresno." She peered into Bohannon's face. "He did make it, didn't he?"

Bohannon nodded. "He made it." This was getting damned uncomfortable. "But I need to know something. How was he in touch with his mother?"

"You aren't a house-sitter. You're a policeman. I can tell by how you ask questions." She made her voice deep. "'I need to know something.'"

Bohannnon tried for a smile. "Don't worry. I'm not going to arrest you for impersonating a Victorian doll." He drew a quick breath. "Something's happened, that's all. The plan Chico and his mother had—it didn't work out. That's why I'm here. To find out what went wrong."

Lettice Van Van was poking into the pockets of the safari jacket. She came up with a little black ring binder and held it out to him. "The number where he called her is in there. I kept it for him because he was starting to forget things. Like some old man with Alzheimer's."

Bohannon frowned at the book and leafed over the pages. Let-

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tice Van Van wrote in red ink. In calligraphic style. It was like a tiny medieval prayer book. "What name?" he said.

"Morton Lowry," she said.

Bohannon almost dropped the book.

She said, "Some friend of his mother's. She'd ring him up from there, or he would call and if she wasn't there, he'd leave messages for her. They talked every day. But it had to be where his father couldn't overhear. His father's a terrible man. An ex-football player. You can imagine. He hates Chico."

Bohannon found the name and the number. The area code was in the next county. He sat on the bench and copied the number into his dog-eared notebook and handed the missal back to Lettice Van Van. "Thank you," he said. "You've been a big help."

She put the book back into her pocket without taking her eyes off him, searching his face, begging without words. It was too much. He couldn't keep this up. He moved to get to his feet, and she caught his arm and clung to it. She drew a shaky breath, tears came into her eyes. Her words were a quavery little squeak. "He's dead, isn't he?"

Bohannon nodded. "I'm sorry."

"They all die." She dug tissues from another of the pockets of the safari jacket, dried her eyes and blew her nose. "That's the trouble with looking after them. They become precious to you. And then they just die." She was weeping for sure now, and her words were hard to understand. "Over and over and over again. So many." She got more Kleenex and tried to mop away the tears, but they just kept coming. "You'd think a person would get used to it. Maybe some do, but not me. Poor Fletcher."

She laid her head on Bohannon's chest. He put his arms around her and held her and stroked her while she sobbed. He didn't tell her poor Fletcher had been shot. It wouldn't help.

Shakespeare by the Sea. The sign was gold gothic letters on a black background and hung off the porch of a typical old saltbox house in Monterey. He found parking a little way along and ambled back to the place and climbed the front steps. In the glass of the front door a sign hung off a string. *Closed.* He put his face to the glass. Bookshelves all around the walls. Tables with books on them. A desk with a telephone, cash register, computer at the center of the room. He knocked on the door, waited, knocked again. Nobody came. He read his watch. 3:35. Middle of the week. Why closed?

There was a combination greenhouse-flower shop next door. He stepped into fragrance and color, dampness and dim green daylight, and asked a woman in a rubber apron. The slim hose in her hand had a misting nozzle with a trigger. She was misting a long table of plants in little green plastic pots. "I don't know, and I wish

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people would stop asking. How do I know where Morton Lowry is?"

"What people?" Bohannon said.

"First that fat girl with the funny hat. Then that woman with the gold Mercedes. If she didn't know, who would? She's been in and out of there"—she jerked her head of short-cropped salt-and-pepper hair in the direction of Shakespeare by the Sea—"almost every day for weeks. Never bought a book—not that I saw." She sniffed. "Life's full of surprises. Who'd have thought Morton Lowry cared about women?"

Bohannon took out his wallet, let it fall open so it showed her his private investigator's license, closed it quickly, and pocketed it again. "I need to locate him. It's police business."

She stopped misting and blinked hard at him. "You certainly don't look like a police officer."

"Special assignment," he said.

"Try the back door," she said. "Wallace Finn might talk to you."

"Who's he?" Bohannon said.

She jerked her head back. "Why, he's the owner. Lowry's just the hired help." She snorted and began misting again. "When he's sober."

Bohannon knocked on the back door of Shakespeare by the Sea, an aluminum screen door a little loose in its frame. The solid door inside it stood open. He called, "Mr. Finn? Bohannon here. San Luis County Sheriff's Department."

"Oh, Lord," an old man's rough voice said. "Is it about Morton?"

"Need to know where he is," Bohannon said. "Can I come in?"

"I don't know where he is. Drunk someplace. Go away."

"Why don't you open your shop? Lots of people in town today."

"They just want to take photos of each other at Cannery Row." Finn appeared dimly. In a wheelchair, a coffee mug in his hand. "I can't run the shop on my own anymore. Doesn't matter. The public's lost interest in books. You watch TV enough, you haven't the brains left for reading."

"Where did he usually go to get drunk?" Bohannon said.

"Not far. That broken-down old car of his won't travel far." Finn grunted. "I don't honestly think it's just a drunk this time. It's been too long. You'd better check the jails."

"They allow you a phone call," Bohannon said. "He didn't call?"

"He just disappeared," Finn said. "Why don't you try doing that?"

"First tell me where he lives," Bohannon said.

And Finn told him.

It was an old flat-roofed frame hotel, two sagging stories, once yellow, now in need of paint. Not on a street where tourists would see it. The buildings on those streets were tarted up. *John Steinbeck slept here!* But he didn't think about this. He was too startled. Because not only were Monterey County sheriff's patrol cars

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parked in front of that bleak hotel—so was a patrol car from San Luis Obispo County. And Lieutenant Phil Gerard stood beside it, looking up at the sun-struck front of the building. Bohannon parked the pickup and jogged across the street.

Gerard stared at him. "I don't believe this."

"What's going on?" Bohannon asked.

"Drowned man was found a couple hours ago, washed up on the beach here. One Morton Lowry. Bookstore clerk and well-known drunk."

"And years ago a teacher at Madrone High School," Bohannon said, "until Clay Gilmore lost him his job. Moral turpitude."

Gerard's eyebrows rose. "Who told you that?"

"If you didn't know it," Bohannon said, "what are you doing here?"

"They found a gun in his pocket," Gerard said, "and they phoned me because the serial number makes it Celia Gilmore's gun."

"Right. You missed the letter, but there was one. Chico was dying and wanted to come home. She knew Clay would never permit it. He'd despise the boy even more now that he had AIDS. And Celia remembered Lowry. Clay had ruined his life. Lowry must hate him. She needed his help, and she got it. Such as it was." Bohannon tilted his head toward the deputies coming out of the hotel. "When they find Lowry's old wreck of a car, tell them to look for an oil leak."

"Jesus." Gerard wagged his head in disgust, looked down at his boots, looked up again, grimly. "All right. You obviously know all about it. Tell me."

Bohannon summed up Lettice Van Van's story. Then he said, "And if you drive over to the local Ramada Inn, right now, you'll find a gold Mercedes in the lot. I spotted it on my way here."

"She's here?" Gerard gaped. "What in God's name for?"

Bohannon shrugged. "She doesn't know Lowry drowned himself. She's waiting for him to sober up and stagger into the bookstore. I expect she'd like her money back. After all, he killed the wrong Gilmore."

Gerard squinted. "She paid him to do it?"

"He wasn't an avenger. He was a drunk. Of course she had to pay him."

"So it comes down to the kid arriving home a week early. And Lowry sneaks in by that back door in the dark to kill Clay Gilmore. And the kid thinks he's a prowler and yells and jumps up. And Lowry panics and shoots him."

"You have a better suggestion?" Bohannon said.

"Hell, no." Gerard got into the patrol car and slammed the door. "But if my mind worked like yours," he said, "I'd never sleep."

"It's questions that keep me awake," Bohannon said. "Not answers." ●

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Art by Allen Davis

TWELVE OF THE LITTLE BUGGERS

by Mat Coward

Middle of September, one of my editors rang—would I like to do a jokey piece on cats?

"Cats?" I said.

"Right," said Jenni. "Like, we were talking it over in the office, and we thought, you know—robins, turkeys, reindeer, et cetera et cetera, puddings . . ."

I couldn't immediately see the connection. "Puddings?" I said.

"Right," said Jenni. "I mean, only three more planning months to Christmas, right?"

"Oh," I said. "The Christmas number. Gotcha."

"Right," said Jenni. "So we thought—no: Let's do cats. Not very Christmas-y, but, you know, different. Cute. Nice big puddy-tat on the cover. Lots of interior pics, lots of colour. Kittens peeking playfully out of Christmas stockings. Lovely tabby mummy-cats posing

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proudly on Yuletide logs. Sweet old toms dozing amid the prezzies, 'neath the glittering tree. And then, seasonal cat stories. Tragic tales of cats given as gifts, but with, like, happy endings. A hundred and one things you can buy your kitty for Christmas. Recipes—"

"Instead of turkey?"

She laughed one of those editorial laughs; the very short sort, because even if editors had a sense of humour they certainly wouldn't have time to indulge it with only three planning months left before Christmas.

I've only met Jenni once in the flesh—what there is of it. She really doesn't have anything much but teeth; that and a slight lisp, which is, in fact, so slight that I tend to doubt its authenticity. First time she commissioned me, she took me to lunch at a reasonably fashionable West End Italian place. I drank imported beer; she ordered mineral water. She asked the waiter for a yogurt—a main-course yogurt, right?—and seemed pretty surprised when he told her they didn't have any. So she just ate bread sticks instead.

I ordered the whole menu.

I could tell now, by listening to her on the phone, that she had that habit of twisting her professionally frazzled hair around her fingers while she spoke; not from coquetry, though, but from repressed, generalised irritation.

"Special celebration recipes. What to feed Tiddles while the family's enjoying the mince pies."

"Yes, I get it," I said, in case she thought I was still confused.

"And, of course, humour."

"Of course," I said. That's what I do: I write humour for humourless magazines. Been doing it all my life. I could have done something else, I suppose. Could have become a mercenary, for instance, but I didn't fancy the training.

"So we thought, you know, Jim Potter. Jim's our man for a spot of cat humour."

"I'm flattered." I wasn't.

"Well," said Jenni, "you're the best, Jim." I wasn't. "We were thinking, you know, urban cats. An A through Z feature, maybe. Or a 'Twenty Crazy Things You Never Knew About.' Or whatever you like."

Mat Coward hails from Somerset, England, and is primarily a humorist, not a crime writer. Lately, he's been trying a crime series featuring a finder of lost cats (you may have seen the first entry in the series in *EQMM* 6/99: "Here Fluffy!"). His new tale is not in the finder series but it does involve cats. "Why do writers write about cats so often?" asks the author. "Because all we do is sit at home all day staring at cats, that's my theory."

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"Fine," I said. "How many words you want?"

"Well, we were thinking, you know, you could go to twelve, maybe. Or eight, with a big photo."

"I'll do eight," I said. Jenni's magazine pays a flat rate, not according to word count. "When do you need the copy?"

"Ummm . . . how about yesterday?" she asked playfully.

"Tricky," I replied, coyly.

"Okay. Week tomorrow?"

"No prob."

"By the way, Jim, I ought to check—you have got a cat yourself? Only if you haven't, you know, sorry, I should have said . . . "

"Oh yeah," I said.

"Oh, really? That's great! I thought you must have. We've got this survey in the Christmas issue, says that men in their thirties living alone are almost always cat persons."

"Oh yeah," I said. "Matter of fact, I've got twelve of the little buggers."

"Twelve!" she squealed. "That's great! You must really love cats!"

The girl's a genius.

I wrote the piece the next day—"Urban Cats: An Unreliable History"—then waited a week until the deadline was up, and faxed it through. Jenni rang to say she loved it. Then she rang again ten minutes later and said my "stuff" was so fabulous, she was putting it on the cover. More money, obviously. Quite a lot more, you know, *money*. Actually.

"And then we were talking about it, and we thought—you know, let's get some pics."

"Great," I said.

"You know," she said, "of your cats. All twelve of them. Wouldn't that be great?"

"Oh yeah," I said.

"Great! So, listen, no time to waste, I'll send a photographer round this afternoon, okay? About five, five-thirty?"

"Oh yeah," I said. "Great."

Then we rang off, and I thought: Jesus-in-a-manger—where am I supposed to get twelve cats from, by five o'clock this afternoon?

The woman at the cat rescue centre wasn't all that helpful. "You want to provide a new home for *twelve* cats?"

"No, hell, that's the last thing I want to do, I don't even like cats. I just want to borrow them for a couple of hours. Really, they'll be back here before anyone notices they've gone."

"You want to *borrow* twelve cats?"

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"Listen, don't get hung up on the number. Half a dozen'd probably do. I could say they'd eaten the others."

"You want to borrow *six* cats?"

"Yeah. One thing; do you deliver? I'm a bit tied up this afternoon, that would really be a great help."

"I don't know if this is some kind of joke, or what, but I think you don't understand what we do here. This isn't Feline Express. We don't keep a fleet of moonlighting students on mopeds, biking Cats-With-Everything direct to your door, thirty minutes max or your money back. We don't—what I'm trying to say is—we don't *lend* cats. Okay? This isn't the National Whiskers Library."

I thought that over for a moment. "Look, if it's a matter of money, I'd be more than happy to put a couple of quid in the collecting tin. Or in your own private collecting tin, if that'd be better."

And then, while she was telling me that she hoped we might meet one day, because she knew a vet who could be relied upon to keep his scissors open and his mouth shut, I suddenly remembered the allotments.

I don't do gardening myself (as you'll know if you've ever read my column, "How Not To Do Gardening," in *Gardener's Week Magazine),* but the quickest route from my house to the pub is via a footpath that runs alongside a little river, right past the allotments—and even I know what an allotment site is: a patch of wasteland divided up into strips, which the local council rents out to residents, mostly old people and food faddists, so that they can grow their own fruit and veg there. Though why anyone should want to bother, when they're lucky enough to live in a country with perfectly good burger bars conveniently situated on every street corner, is far beyond my powers of explanation.

The point is, however, this: What did I often see on those allotments, on my way to and from the boozerama? Cats. I saw cats. Loads of them. Stray cats, presumably. Well, either that, or gardening cats.

Never having had a cat, I didn't know what kind of gear you needed to catch them. So I just grabbed everything I could think of: a big sack, a length of wood, a tin of date-expired treacle, a box of candles, and a whistle.

Took me two hours. Partly, that was because I kept losing count. It's not easy—and if you ever have anything to do with cats yourself, you might want to remember this—it's not easy to count cats in a big sack. Eventually, I had a brainwave: What did it matter if I got too many cats? I mean, if there were thirteen of them, I could

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just tell the photographer that one of the little buggers had had a baby, right?

Don't ask me to describe the cats. They were various colours. I don't know what you call cat colours. Some were sort of splodgy, some sort of spotty, some sort of stripy. And some were sort of splodgy and spotty and stripy all at once. They were various sizes.

They were cats, anyway, so I took them home.

I just about reached the gate when all of a sudden there was a man standing in front of me holding his arms out like a recently demoted traffic cop. I didn't like the look of him: a long, cruel face, a superior scowl. Fair enough, though—he obviously didn't like the look of me, either.

"What have you got in that sack?"

"In the sack?"

"What's moving about in your sack?"

"Oh, yeah. Tortoises," I explained.

"Tortoises?" Like he didn't believe me.

"Certainly," I said. "Just picked 'em up in those woods back there."

Trying to edge round me, trying to get a good squeeze at my cat-sack, he said: "There are no *tortoises* in those woods, for heaven's sake."

"Of course there aren't," I said, "I got them all in this sack."

"What for?" he sneered.

"For? Why, for my three kids, naturally. They love tortoises, but the way they get through them, I can't afford to keep buying them. Kids, huh? So I thought: Hey, do it yourself!"

He sneered on in silence.

"So I'm taking them home for . . . for little Gerald," I said. "And . . ." The man waited. "And for little Geraldine."

"That's only two children," he said, unpleasantly.

"Well, not really," I said, "because you see, the third one's also called Geraldine, due to, like, y'know, a mix-up at the hospital."

He started to say something that apparently began with *"You—"* but then he stopped, and I realised he was staring over my shoulder. Turning round, I saw in the distance, back by the entrance to the woods, a scruffy young guy in a combat jacket, striding towards us.

"You just stay away from those cats. Got it?" And with that the interrogation was broken off, as the long-faced vigilante disappeared through a gap in the bushes.

Weird behaviour. But then, once people let cats into their lives, they do strange things. That's a medical fact.

Home safe, with about thirty minutes to spare, I unleashed the cats. Then I poured a gigantic vodka, lit a small cigar, and relaxed.

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Carl, the pointlessly enthusiastic, ponytailed lensman—bright orange shirt, collar size XXL—was pretty impressed with my cats. "Great cats!" he said. "They're so—I dunno, they're so wild, aren't they?"

"Oh yeah," I said. "They really are."

"They just never keep still for a moment, do they? Rushing around like crazy things!"

"Oh yeah," I said. "Thing is, they're not really used to company."

"No?"

"Not really. I tend to ignore them, myself."

"Okay! Look, do you think you could get them, sort of, all together in one place? You know, so I can do the old clickety-click?"

"Well," I said. "It's like you said yourself: They're pretty wild cats."

"Maybe if you fed them?"

"Brilliant!" I said. "That's a brilliant idea. Um . . . you got any mice or anything?"

The photographer laughed—rather meaninglessly, I thought. "Might be easier if you just, you know, opened a can or something."

"Oh yeah," I said. "Good thinking." So I opened a few cans, emptied the contents into a plastic washing-up bowl, and put the bowl on the kitchen floor. Sure enough, the cats came running.

"That is amazing," said Carl.

"Must've been hungry," I said.

"Yeah, but—chili con carne? I never knew cats ate chili con carne."

"Oh yeah," I explained. "Your cat, you see, your average cat is a big meat-eater."

He laughed again and started setting up his lights. "Well, they obviously love it. And I can see you love your cats, too. That tinned chili costs a lot more than cat food."

Cat food, I thought. *Damn.*

An hour later, he'd gone ("Listen, if you ever decide you've got too many cats," he said on the doorstep, "my little girl . . . "—"Don't worry," I said, "you'll be the first to hear") and it was over. Just call me Mr. Resourceful.

It wasn't over.

Once the photographer's car had disappeared around the corner, I loaded up the old sack again, and set off once more for the allotments. I whistled as I walked, light of heart though heavily burdened.

I didn't meet anyone on my short journey, except a comedian in

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a milkman's tunic, who told me: "You want to change your butcher, pal. That meat's wriggling."

Back amongst the beans and squashes, I shook out the sack, and out tumbled the cats. They sat there on the ground, looking at me, but they didn't look for long. They couldn't, because I wasn't there for long.

Late that night, a crashing sound woke me. By the time I got downstairs, there were three cats sitting in my hallway, making cat noises. Even as I stood there, another two appeared through a small, flapped hole in the door (which I'd previously supposed was there for the benefit of short-sighted postmen).

I hastily gathered up a couple of cats and opened the door. That was a mistake. The cats in my arms screeched, scratched, and then leapt back into the house. A cat which had been in the process of using the hole when I opened the door, and which was now swinging there like a magician's assistant interrupted in the middle of a sawing-the-lady-in-half trick, just screeched. And all the cats outside, who had been queuing patiently for the hole, dashed past me with the odd chirrup of appreciation at my good manners.

Right, I thought. *Deep breaths. Go about this logically.*

I found a bit of stiff cardboard and sellotaped it over the hole. I retrieved my trusty sack and carried it up to my bedroom. There I found three cats: one under the bed, one already asleep inside the bed, and another squatting vulgarly on top of the wardrobe. Not without some difficulty, and a few minor wounds, I achieved their ensackment.

Then I left the bedroom, shutting the door firmly behind me, and emptied the captured cats out onto the street. There was no way I was visiting the allotments at this time of night, dressed only in boxer shorts and a pair of mock-leather slippers.

I repeated this operation in each room, methodically, and then, exhausted and slightly bleeding, went back to my bedroom.

Which now contained four cats.

It was a hot night, and I'd left most of the windows in the house open. Not open enough for burglars, but evidently open enough for cats.

I started over.

I have a vague memory of myself, at some stage in that eternal furry night, standing in the hall with a bottle of vodka in one hand and a box of Elastoplast in the other, singing, "Close the doors, they're coming in the windows! Close the windows, they're coming in the doors!"

I don't know if you've ever been in one of those situations where you're trying to shove a number of small jellies up a wide drainpipe? I know I haven't. I don't suppose anybody ever has, actually,

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but if by some extraordinarily unlikely chance you know what I'm talking about, then you'll know exactly how I felt.

Late morning, crusty on the sofa, I awoke to discover I still had the vodka, I still had the sticking plaster, and I still had a house full of cats. Twelve of the little buggers.

Obviously, clearing them out one by one, or even sack by sack, wasn't going to do it. They'd probably just hang around the front door, and I'd never be able to go outside again for fear of inviting reinfestation. No; what I needed here was a permanent solution.

So I called my Aunty Cissie.

Aunty Cissie is eighty-seven, and to my certain knowledge she's been dead three years. I should know: I was at her funeral.

"Jim, my dear! You good boy, you've just rung up to see how I am."

"Now then, Aunty. You know I only ring when I want something." Incapable of hearing harsh truth without disbelieving it, my Aunty Cissie; podgy, breathless, sagging, permanently on the homeward leg of a return trip to doolally-land. Or do I mean a jolly, rotund, chuckle-faced, happy-go-lucky senior citizen? No, I don't.

"Do you know, I haven't seen you for three years?" she said, as delightedly as she said everything. "Not since your Great-Uncle Norman's funeral."

"Oh, right," I said. Now I come to think of it, it might not have been her funeral. Might have been somebody else's. I don't remember; I didn't stay long. "So you're still alive, then?"

She chuckled. "Just about, dear. You are sweet. I know how you worry about me."

"Mmm-mmm," I said. I don't like to commit myself too strongly over the phone; you never know who's listening. "Look, Aunty. You know about cats. You ever heard of cats . . . adopting people?"

"Oh yes, they'll do that, dear. If their old owners have got a new baby, or a new kitten, or a new computer game. Cats demand attention, and they won't tolerate rivals. Or if they've been mistreated, or living rough, or they're not getting the kind of food they like. I had a cat once that wouldn't eat anything but Chinese stir-fried mushrooms."

"How about twelve at once? Mass defection—you ever hear of a case like that?"

"Oh, dear! Is that what you've got? Twelve of the little buggers! Well, I'm not surprised. You always were a gentle boy. They must all be in love with you!"

Just my luck, I thought. *In a world full of seventeen-year-old nymphos . . .*

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"Still," said Aunty Cissie. "They're company, aren't they? And we all need company, don't we, now and then?"

Oh, God . . .

"Which reminds me, dear. When are you coming to see me? How about next week?"

"No, sorry, I'm pretty busy next week. And the week after. But you're right, we must make a definite date. Tell you what, I'll come round one day next year."

"Oh, that is kind of you, dear. I shall count the hours! Oh, but Jim?" she added as I began the long process of hanging up. "Don't make it a Thursday."

"Not a Thursday, Aunty. Right you are."

"No, dear. You see, Thursday's my night for going to the lavatory."

So, there you are. Cat psychology is pretty simple really, once you know what you're doing. And what I did was this: I didn't feed them, and I removed the cardboard from the hole. And after twenty-four hours of involuntary hunger-striking, they forgot the taste of chili con carne, began to wonder what they were doing here, and one by one slipped off back to the allotments—having first peed on every available surface and in every imaginable crevice. I could have rented out the house as a rehabilitation centre for the nasally-disadvantaged.

Anyway, it was over.

Until Jenni rang again.

"Jim—the pics are totally fabulous! What we thought was, we'd like to blow one of your cats up."

"Blow them all up if you like," I said, pleased to hear so sensible a suggestion from so unexpected a source.

"For the cover," she said. "That gingery one with the kinky tail—you know which one I mean?"

Was there a gingery one? "Oh yeah," I said.

"Great! So, like, what do you call her?"

"Stinking rat," I said.

"Stinking *what?*"

"Er—no, no. Not stinking. Slinking. Slinking Cat."

"Oh, that's *sweet.*"

"Slinky for short."

"Oh, that is *so* sweet!"

"Oh yeah," I said. "Well, she's a sweet cat. Glad you like her."

"Love her," said Jenni. "In fact, what we were thinking was, you know, why don't we send Carl over again, get him to do some more pics? Just of Slinky, you know, make a bit of a feature of her."

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"Great," I said. "Some more pics. Great idea."

"Well, you know, we're talking about maybe even a calendar. You know, like a spin-off. She's really a special little puss. My publisher's own personal idea, actually. First one he's had for ages! Whoops, no, he's, you know, smashing, actually. Anyway, if it works out, we could actually pay you some, you know, truly decent money for once. I mean, the publisher's just given me this cheque with, like, a signature at the bottom and nothing else! So, what do you think, Jim?"

"Oh yeah," I said. "Totally fabulous."

A flashlight. A writer on the edge of madness. The allotments by night.

"Slinky . . . Slinky . . . C'mere, Slinky . . ."

What the hell was I calling her *Slinky* for, for God's sake?

Yup, that was Slinky all right. Sitting on my bed, eating chili con carne from a plastic washing-up bowl. I could tell by comparing her with the big photo Jenni had faxed me. Good old Slinky, my sweet little, special little golden goose.

There was a knock on the door.

The man now standing in my hall was angry. He was also fiftyish, well-dressed, greyly bald, and the same boney bloke who'd doubted my tortoises on the allotments the other day. But mostly he was angry.

"It's *my* cat, Mr. Potter. You have stolen my cat, and I demand its return. Without any further argument. Understand?"

"Must be some mistake, Dr. Lane. My little Slinky and me, we—"

"Look! I saw you take the damn cat. From the allotments. I was down there looking for her—because she was missing, right? And I saw you take her, and I followed you home. Now hand her over, please."

"Ah," I said. "I think I can solve this misunderstanding." I dragged a crumpled twenty-pound note from my back pocket. "I'll keep Slinky, my beloved pet of long-standing, and you take this and get another cat."

"Twenty pounds?" he yelled.

"Hey, if you're proud, I can respect that. We'll go halves. A tenner each."

Sounded fair to me, but what I hadn't counted on was that the phrase *get another cat* turned out to mean "Why don't you stick this in your ear and twist it?" in Dr. Lane-language. Must have done, I reckoned, because Lane was really horrified.

"Get another cat?" he gasped.

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I don't know if you've ever been to one of those weddings where everybody keeps throwing up on the bride's mother? But if you have, then picture in your mind the expression the bride's mother was wearing by the end of a long day, and you'll know just how much disgust one face can be made to contain.

"You obviously know nothing of cats, Mr. Potter, or you would realise that when one loses one's cat one doesn't just go out and buy another one."

"Sure," I said. "I can understand that. I'll tell you what, how about a *dozen* cats? Hey, think about it: If dry-cleaners took compensation that seriously, they'd all go out of business, right?"

He looked at me as if I'd just escaped the noose on an insanity plea, and marched out of the house, down the street, without another word.

"Seriously, Dr. Lane," I called after him. "I'm not kidding! I know where I can lay my hands on more cats than a faith-healer in a violin factory!"

So, okay: When I got home from the pub two days later to find one of my ground-floor windows broken open, and the house doing a neat imitation of a Slinky-Free Zone, it wasn't exactly a three-pipe puzzle.

But, honestly. All that fuss over a cat? After all, Lane didn't know how much Slinky was worth.

I had about three hours before Carl arrived to take the portfolio which, with any luck, would keep me in sunshine holidays for the next three winters.

"Should've called you Lucky," I told Slinky, as I stuffed her back into the sack which, by now, was becoming like her second home. "I never thought nasty old Dr. Lane would be idiotic enough to let you out to play on the allotments so soon."

Which was when Dr. Lane, approaching unobserved from the rear, slammed his fist into my spine, shouting: "You moron! You've no idea what you're interfering with here!"

What I had no idea of was why a grown doctor should be willing to assault a virtual stranger just to keep possession of a gingery cat with a kinky tail. What I did have an idea of, however, was that Lane had a big stick in his hand, and was just about mad enough to use it on me as I lay sprawled at his feet. His grey face was red now.

On an impulse, I swung the sack, Slinky and all, right into his belly. The cat screamed; he didn't. He just tripped, fell, and landed with a splash in the shallow river. A splash and a thud, the latter caused by the sudden connection of his head with a rock.

I stared at him for about a minute. He didn't move.

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I was still a little shaky when Carl arrived, but the vodka was helping.

"Where're all the other cats?" he asked, as I should have guessed he would.

"Who knows where staff go on their afternoons off?" I replied, haughtily. "To the pictures, I expect."

Carl laughed (which used up about ten minutes of the day, right off), took his photos, and eventually left. Slinky had chili for dinner. I had vodka.

When a noise in the hall woke me the next morning, I thought for a moment it was one of Slinky's old mates discovering how to enter a house through the letter box. But it was the local paper, with a stop-press item announcing the suspicious death of Dr. Reginald Lane, 54, research scientist, at his home in River Walk.

At his home?

Police were said to be unable to explain why, when found dead sitting in a sun-lounger on his veranda, Dr. Lane (who had been shot twice in the lower body at short range) was wearing wet clothing and had a crude, apparently self-applied, freshly blood-stained bandage on his head.

The mystery—for me—only lasted until the lunchtime TV news, which reported that an animal-rights activist had confessed to the "justified execution of a mass-murderer." Lane had been right; I'd had no idea what I was interfering with.

Far from being an aggrieved pet lover, the doctor was actually what that Sunday's tabloids called a vivisectionist. Slinky—and all the other cats on the allotments—had been part of an experiment, a deeply illegal experiment, it transpired, designed to develop a rapidly contagious but easily contained feline disease.

Quite who was sponsoring Lane's alfresco laboratory has never been established, but speculation centered on the government, on the property developers, on all the usual suspects. At any rate, some people, it seems, do not value urban feral-cat populations in quite the way that I have come to value them.

And I certainly do value Slinky. I do. The calendar—*Slinky's Big Year* (text by J. Potter)—will be, Jenni's marketing colleagues assure me, the biggest-selling gift item nationwide next Christmas. There is talk of an animated television series. Two book publishers are bidding for the rights to Slinky's autobiography, which I am to ghostwrite (well, yeah, *obviously).* I'll have to make up some amusing adventures for her. The truth, I think, would not do at all.

Which brings me to why I'm writing this strictly private memoir.

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The remaining allotment cats were rounded up by the council's vet and taken away for tests "as a precaution." There was really no cause for concern, the authorities insisted, but just to be on the safe side . . .

(I bet they ended up on some health farm, all chili con carne and Ping-Pong and free booze, and all at the public's expense. While your average humourist has to virtually kill himself just to meet the mortgage. Ask me, the welfare state saps enterprise. Look at Slinky: She got herself a career, she didn't sit around waiting for handouts.)

I don't know if you've ever lived in close proximity to a cat which may or may not be carrying an unidentified bug, which may or may not be transferable to humans, and which may or may not kill you at some time in the future. But if you have, then you'll know that it's something that tends to worry you a little.

But really, most of the time I'm too busy worrying about what it's going to be like entering the super-tax bracket.

Still, "just to be on the safe side . . ."

If I should predecease my Aunty Cissie, I would like her to inherit my copyrights and royalties. And please, whoever reads this, tell her I'm terribly sorry I never visited her.

I'm not, in fact, but what I always say is: Being nice doesn't cost anything, does it?

At least, it doesn't when it doesn't cost anything. ●

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STRANGER SONG

by Melanie Lawrence

Was it the double of my dream
The woman that by me lay
Dreamed, or did we halve a dream
Under the first cold gleam of day?
"Towards Break of Day,"
W. B. Yeats

A native of Los Angeles, Melanie Lawrence currently lives in Berkeley and works at the city's public health clinic. Prior to that, she was employed for a number of years as an editor at publishing houses in Los Angeles and San Francisco and as a freelance writer and book reviewer. Ms. Lawrence's debut fiction just barely falls within the crime genre, but it's a fine and original work. †

It was raining gently the first time I toured Gabe's home. A small and shabby Edwardian flat, it felt spacious, an illusion created by uncarpeted hardwood floors, high ceilings, and wide bay windows curtained with ivy. Lined, as I had expected, with books, CDs, cassettes, battered albums, and an elaborate sound system. As I eased the door shut, a sleek black and silver tabby materialized, looping around my ankles. This was no surprise, either; I regularly discovered cat-food packages in his recycling. I knew a lot about him: his taste in music (acoustic folk of all kinds), his liking for solitude, the muted water tones he fancied in clothing, and I imagined much of the rest.

Thank the goddess for the environmental movement and conscientious people like Gabe. Years ago, in *Rolling Stone*, I had read about fans sifting through Bob Dylan's garbage for boots of Spanish leather, a shred of lyric in the master's own hand. Now I only had to walk down Gabe's street on a Friday morning, scoop his recycled mixed paper into my backpack, and head home to sort and analyze my findings: sheet music and receipts, junk mail and cereal boxes; once even some old love letters torn into scraps—but not so small I couldn't piece them together—the occasional small

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condom package that always brought tears to my eyes. I sought consolation, however, in the fact that they were the vending-machine variety. At least he was going out to amuse himself, not sharing a jumbo box of protection with some other female.

Yes, I was becoming an expert on Gabe Morrison. I knew how much money he withdrew from his checking account every week and when he went to the market and what brand of soap he bought there. Most important, I possessed his songs, those jarring pastiches of Leonard Cohen and Celtic balladry. I'd slog through the tired metaphors and strained attempts at lyricism, grinning with amusement and love. How serious he was! And, for someone with otherwise impeccable taste, how untalented. How wonderful to want to express your emotions so much, to the point of grinding out this slush. And how terrible to love creativity and to have so little yourself.

Sometimes I wondered if my . . . research could be considered creative. After all, I had unearthed a great deal of information about someone I barely knew in the conventional sense. I had even obtained access to his home.

Please understand that espionage was not my standard approach. I had always observed my lovers openly and asked direct questions. To my disappointment, though, the most absorbing stories belonged to those who held no lasting attraction for me. They were simply chronicles to ponder.

But Gabe was different and that was why I shadowed him—because I couldn't understand why I thought of him incessantly, why he haunted me when none of the other men I'd known had. It felt like an addiction must, the endless craving to hear that silky voice and see his sudden fey smile, to find out more and more about him. Sometimes I'd sit in the rocking chair in my bedroom late at night holding Albertine, my Russian Blue, against one shoulder like a dozing infant and contemplate the trajectory of a life devoted to gathering information and theories about one Gabriel Leland Morrison. So much, so very much to know about another human being, but who could know him better, eventually, than his shadow?

His shadow was the woman who came to Frontiers every Sunday evening to browse the books and CDs and watch Gabe from a discreet corner of the coffee bar as he patiently assisted customers and rang up purchases. It was she who had developed an excessive interest in birds, the ornithology section being located just behind the information desk, a perfect place to overhear useful facts, such as Gabe's full name, which had led me to his address. His shadow knew that he was a Taurus with a Cancer moon, that he held an MFA in musicology and loved pesto. She knew the

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names of his friends and his hometown, his thesis advisor and his therapist. She suspected his reasons for seeing the therapist.

And now his shadow had found the ultimate reward.

But I hadn't been looking for a literal way in, not consciously; not even his shadow would ever have aimed that high. No, an opportunity presented itself and I pounced, without reflection, my usual caution abandoned.

I was doing my customary Friday morning vigil across the street and seven doors from Gabe's building, sun visor down, sweatshirt hood and newspaper up, binoculars slung around my neck, backpack agape. He emerged at last, lugging a plastic crate of sorted recycling. I picked up the binoculars. He had a light step, a springing grace that I loved. He set the crate down on the parkway and stretched and smiled, hands behind his head, long fingers combing through his freshly washed hair. My stomach clenched, and I thought of the old John Lee Hooker song: "I love the way you walk./I'm crazy 'bout your walk./. . . I got my eyes on you."

There was no one left on the street after Gabe rounded the corner on his way to the bus and Frontiers. I waited my usual ten minutes and was about to open the car door when I heard the growl of a motorcycle. It swerved into the driveway of Gabe's building. I lifted the binoculars again. A big-boned, youngish man with a Buddy Holly pompadour clambered off and ran up the walkway. He reappeared moments later, pulling an envelope from a pocket of his leather jacket and jamming it into Gabe's mailbox. Then he sprinted back to his motorcycle and took off.

I just could not resist. I waited another few minutes and got out of my car. I sauntered down the street, consulting my address book as if searching for a specific house. In front of Gabe's building I paused, gazing at the number, before crossing the street and approaching the row of mailboxes. No flicker of noise or movement from the building, so I opened his box and slipped the envelope into my sweatshirt pocket. I lifted the bag of recycled paper as well, so high and excited I didn't even bother stuffing it into the pack. A good morning's work.

A few blocks later, I pulled over. I swear I only intended to read its contents before replacing the envelope, but when I felt its heft, I knew, instinctively, greedily, what was inside. There was also a check for $250 clipped to a scribbled note:

Hey, Gabe. Sorry again about flaking at the last minute, but it turned out Ingrid lined us up for NINE gigs in New Mexico, and I'm off to Santa Fe this morning. We even canceled the set tonight at Jump City. Did you get my messages? Your machine sounded weird. Anyway, I hope you found someone else—if not, Pete got home yesterday. Thanks for the loan. Take care. Jonny.

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All I could do for a moment was stare at the key in my hand. Then I smiled, remembering a Post-It I had scavenged the month before, scrawled with initials and dates and prices. Gabe was going east for a week. He needed a housesitter.

I worked on automatic pilot that day, dispensing herbal remedies. An ounce of comfrey for one woman and three ounces of raspberry leaf for her heavily pregnant companion. Salt substitute for an elderly gentleman. Echinacea syrup and blue cohosh. I smiled and measured and bagged and labeled, weighing all the while how I might feasibly spend the next seven days. I knew where I might spend them. When I had called his number, Gabe's answering machine was all sputter and static. With any luck, it hadn't recorded Jonny's messages.

After closing The Rowan Tree an hour early, I drove back to his street. A search through my Gabe files, along with some telephone calls, had almost convinced me he was taking CTC Airlines late that same night. I wanted to witness his return home and make sure he didn't look for a key.

Gabe strolled around the corner just after 6:30. I felt my heart pick up and refocused the binoculars. It was hard to see through the overcast spring twilight, but he appeared to merely glance at his mail. No sign of surprise or alarm. No frantic search of the box. Once inside his apartment, he stayed there. My breathing slowed, and I settled down to wait as long as necessary. Then I would go home, pack, and call the airport to make sure the flight had actually gotten off the ground. And then—I inhaled deeply at the thought of the risk I was about to take but reminded myself that a risk-free life, like an unexamined one, probably wasn't worth living.

Maneuvers went as well as I could have hoped. I had only been listening to my car's tape deck (Doc Watson, Gabe's idol) for two hours when an airport-express van honked. Gabe appeared on the walkway with a large duffel bag and a violin case. I sat back. So he really was leaving tonight, and no doubt expected Jonny to arrive after his Jump City gig.

"Excellent," I said softly. "Now, you go enjoy yourself, my lad. Button up your overcoat and don't forget your vitamins. No need to worry about your cat; I'll take very good care of him."

The cat's name was Arthel, according to his collar, and he was to prove a devoted companion, if a little cloying for my taste after my Albertine's self-contained dignity. We would do fine, I thought.

A note on the hall table in Gabe's small, precise hand instructed Jonny to give Arthel kibble in the morning and wet food at night. I had given careful thought to the problem of how to keep an ani-

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mal fed without apparent human agency: I would furnish Arthel with his favorite wet food myself and pack the cans out. Fortunately, Gabe stocked economy-size bags of dry food. One of these I would push over and rip open along the side, as if clawed by a desperate feline, just before I moved out.

I must remember to empty Arthel's water bowl on the last day, I thought, as I inspected the kitchen, painted cream with leaf-green trim. It hadn't been remodeled in decades, but was in decent shape: no moldy odor or damp patches on the ceiling. Gabe had transformed one wall into an ongoing collage of concert tickets and posters and publicity stills. Local and national folk luminaries gazed down soulfully at me, and I found myself laughing out loud at them all. I had brought it off. I had penetrated his hearth and home. I was that much closer to knowing him—and myself.

And so I explored Gabe's turf, flashlight in one hand, glass of red wine in the other, mentally adding to the list of cautionary measures I had compiled during the day. I would pack out my trash and recyclables every morning. Non-junk mail I could retrieve for safekeeping and stuff back before I left for good, dropping Jonny's envelope into the overgrown foliage behind the mailboxes. Showers I would have to take at home. The plumbing in these old buildings could be very noisy, and Gabe's bathroom was as old-fashioned as the kitchen, even to the chipped claw-foot tub and pedestal sink.

To my relief, a kitchen light had been left on and shades drawn in all the rooms. I would leave these arrangements and be as discreet as possible about any other lights I used.

These precautions brought up a delicate point: Did any of his neighbors know he expected a sitter? If I was too quiet—and I planned to come and go only at daybreak or after dark—would someone grow alarmed? On the other hand, if I made any amount of noise, then a neighbor might mention it to Gabe upon his return. I finally decided on the middle road of moving softly, but not exaggeratedly so.

Really, the most troublesome feat would be remembering not to shift his possessions around. But enough angst, I told myself on the threshold of the small bedroom, taking in the queen-size futon and tapestry pillows, the hanging baskets of ferns, the wrap-around shelves, the second audio system; I hadn't come here to drown in paranoia but in Gabe.

My wine glass was empty, and I refilled it with water from the elegant raku carafe on the bedside table. "Gabe, my love," I whispered, mock-reverent. "To you and your good taste." I was starting to feel rather marvelous, pleased with my own skill and daring. The sight of a black tank top hanging from the closet doorknob recalled a favorite fantasy. I bundled what I was wearing into my

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suitcase and put on his garment, smoothing it down over my hips. Then I turned down the bed, slowly, savoring the gesture, reached up to unpin my hair, and paused. I had forgotten my hair.

The maternal side of my family tends to gray early, and by the time I was thirty there were pewter streaks radiating from the crown of my head. Now it was all gray, rinsed with blue malva to a pure silver. It was striking, too much so. Loose strands blazed under any amount of light and would show up nicely against Gabe's dark green flannel sheets. I must be careful to inspect them and the floors every day. I must remember to pull up my sweatshirt hood before I left at dawn, out the back gate, down the narrow alley, home to Albertine.

Gabe was due back in nine days, Sunday afternoon. Presumably he would call Jonny if his plans changed, but I intended to leave Saturday morning anyway, just in case. So, since this would be my only weekend in his quarters, I had to make it a profitable one.

I awoke close to noon. Arthel stretched and purred beside me, and I stretched with him, tasting the pleasure of lying in Gabe's warm bed, welcomed by his pet, encircled by his possessions. The rain had stopped, and sunlight, filtered by the rice-paper shades, flashed over the green sheets and Arthel's fur. I felt perfectly happy, happier than I could ever remember, contained within the moment like fruit in a basket.

For half an hour, I lay there and examined his most intimate surroundings at my leisure. Several yards and centuries of British and Irish poetry, countless CDs, a penny whistle and two acoustic guitars, a quartz geode. Candid photos: Malvina Reynolds performing at a labor rally; someone who looked like a very young and chubby Gordon Lightfoot.

Now here was something I hadn't deduced: Gabe suffered from an ulcer. There were appropriate pharmaceuticals on the bedside table, along with three flasks of herbal bitters. These explained the raku carafe and cup, as well as the little bottles I kept finding on Fridays. (Gabe was fond of his food; I had assumed garden-variety digestive upsets.) He was apparently trying to placate the ulcer, meanwhile eating and drinking as he pleased and using diluted bitters to make up for it. Next to this paraphernalia was an array of controls and headsets, all belonging to the sound system. He didn't appear to own a television. Music journals were furled in a willow basket on the floor, near a well-thumbed *Oxford Book of Ballads* and some Ursula LeGuin novels.

With some reluctance, I finally arose and put on leggings and one of Gabe's flannel shirts. There was work to be done. I ran his brush through my hair and went into the kitchen to make myself

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a pot of coffee. After two mugs, I was ready to explore and absorb—within reason.

The pleasure of my relationship with Gabe, I had quickly realized, depended on a certain control, a balance between hard data and my own deductions. My exertions sometimes produced implications that bothered me, revelations that hurt. Setting limits and honoring them was what kept me sane. The cardinal rule was no harassment. I didn't follow Gabe in the street or call his home at strange hours or demand anything from him at all. Until the day before, I had taken only what he chose to discard. Thus I absolved myself of the title of stalker, madwoman, psychotic, whatever else the law or the mental health profession might choose to label me. Admittedly, my latest role demanded more complex justification, but I would deal with that issue later.

Therefore, the file cabinet and his desk and bureau drawers remained Gabe's private dominion. Documents and other objects left out in the open, though, were fair game: that oval basket of sheet music, for example. Much of it, I was happy to note, had been the victim of Gabe's songwriting efforts.

As I sat cross-legged on a big cushion in a splash of sunlight, listening to Mississippi John Hurt on the headphones and skimming Gabe's latest drafts, I wondered what kept him at the songwriting when he made no apparent progress. But his persistence was doubtless admirable, and I couldn't be anything but fond of a practice that made me laugh and provided additional clues to his character and concerns. Studiedly cynical art songs, a few would-be traditional ballads, an attempt or two at Dylanesque surrealism—the only discernible tie was an ongoing theme of change and disenchantment.

One of the art songs was particularly interesting: "So many women, such sad nights,/Shifting dreams, blasted by light./Anyone is better off without me." There was a notation in the margin: "I really hurt this one. Show Richard?" Richard was his analyst. I might be right, then, as to why he was in therapy: problems reconciling his ideals and expectations—about art, about women, about himself—with reality. I smiled thinly at this. I had found the perfect solution to that dilemma.

The weekend gave me so much to think about that it was almost a relief to steal out of Gabe's early on Monday. It set my routine for the rest of the week: the coffee-fueled getaway at dawn; home to feed Albertine, shower, breakfast, and water the garden; work; another stop at home to check on Albertine and gather some dinner provisions; and then a delicious evening with Gabe's books and music and cat.

Appropriately, there was an earthquake that week, late Thursday evening. Nothing serious, a mild tremor that rattled the

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bureau and briefly aroused Arthel, drowsing on my lap as I listened to Cajun fiddle music. Earthquakes held meaning for me, having become linked in my mind with what passed for life with Gabe. One day, my world had been calm, ordered: work, a few friendships, Albertine, gardening, books, concerts, the occasional pleasurable but brief affair. Twenty-four hours later, it had shifted forever and begun reforming around a new core.

I became acquainted with Gabe, the new Frontiers clerk, several months before the first quake. Undoubtedly attractive he was, with that bone structure and Cheshire Cat smile, but not my type. He seemed to enjoy chatting me up, commenting on my taste in music and books, admiring my favorite, my only, flamboyant article of clothing, a bottle-green suede Afghani coat, a mint-condition survivor of the sixties.

Once away from Frontiers, however, I didn't give him or his sartorial preferences a thought. It was just a lick of frosting on my day, being waited on by this engaging young man who sang to himself as he worked. Until the Saturday afternoon, almost two years ago, when I stopped at Frontiers for an espresso and Gabe caught my eye. He was helping a sightless customer find a CD. There was something endearing, magnetic about the tilt of his head, the gentle intensity of his voice. ". . . the greatest living folk guitarist," I heard him pronounce. "Take my arm and come around this way. I'll play you some cuts. He'll change your mind."

The quake awoke me around dawn from a confused dream of crowds and music. The initial tremor was followed by a short, hard shock—so deep that I can feel it still, a dragon uncoiling in the earth directly beneath my house. That was the day my life rearranged itself.

I found myself thinking about the man at Frontiers, the one with the clear eyes and the smile that came out of nowhere. Every half-hour or so, I imagined his face, heard him speak. I went to Frontiers again during my lunch break on Monday and yet again two days later, telling myself at the time that I really needed a new cello CD or gardening handbook. In a few weeks, I had a good idea of Gabe's work schedule. The rest is my own peculiar history.

Viewed from a distance, the obsessive state is rather fascinating. Some days I even found it perversely entertaining, a challenge to my resourcefulness. Over time, as the fixation rooted and spread, I learned to operate on several levels spontaneously. Even when I was with other people, attending to customers or talking to Rosemary, my assistant at The Rowan Tree, I was still with Gabe; some part of my mind was always focused on him. The very

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thought of Gabe became company of a sort, a faithful friend who offset my growing isolation.

Obsession not only is constant, but its concerns are wide-ranging and they feel vast, even the trivial taking on a ridiculous importance. I toasted Gabe silently every time I drank a glass of wine. His name was my password on The Rowan Tree's computer, his birthdate my bank-card security code. Certain songs held an almost magical significance for me, made numinous by their connection to him. One day at work I discovered a receipt dated the day before the quake and felt tears falling down my face. I had been different then: free, and innocent of my true nature. I would never be that way again.

Why not get to know him in person? I used to wonder myself at my visceral aversion to the idea. True, I was intrigued by the notion of learning another person without the filter of a direct relationship. The process was more objective—and more revealing. I was seeing, in fragments, who Gabe really was, rather than what he chose to divulge. Thus I remained in control, invulnerable.

Occasionally that week, I let myself wonder yet again where all this—the housesit, the recycling, the visits to Frontiers, my fantasies—was leading. He was such a habit now, so much a part of my life, if not my life itself. For all I knew, at age eighty I would still be keeping track of Gabe, still monitoring his discarded condom packages and delighting in his awful lyrics. But, as usual, I considered my eccentric prospects for a few moments, and then sighed and shrugged. Some people live for their children, others for making money, some merely in hope that the next day might prove a little bit better. I lived for figuring out Gabe Morrison.

It had been a sad yet peaceful evening, my last one at Gabe's, spent listening to Irish ballads on his bedside headphones until I fell asleep to the strains of "Carrickfergus." My mind was stirring with information gathered and conclusions drawn. I didn't need any more for the time being; the music he loved sufficed.

I awoke, muscles tense, in the middle of the night. The front door creaked. I turned over, clawing the headset out of my hair, and heard the low, deep murmur of a male voice. "Arthel-cat! Did you miss me? Sssh. Let's not wake Jonny. Hey, what's this? Does Jonny have a friend with him? No wonder he didn't answer the phone." He must have seen my coat, draped over a chair. Then there was a wordless exclamation that chilled me, and rapid steps in the hall.

I rolled out of the futon and onto my feet, wondering how I could get past him, but he was already fumbling with the light. I closed my eyes against the glare. When I opened them Gabe was stand-

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ing in the middle of the room, looking at me. I wore nothing but his black tank top. He breathed a word, and I realized he had said my name.

"Yes?" I responded. My legs trembled but not my voice, and I returned his gaze. Had I ever told him my name, I wondered distractedly, or paid for anything at Frontiers with a check or credit card?

"What are you doing here?" His voice was unnaturally soft and his eyes wide. He moved a pace closer, very slowly, like someone approaching a deer. He was staring at my left shoulder, at the delicate botanical tattoo I had had etched there when I entered graduate school. A favorite of mine: St. John's Wort, or in folk parlance, Joan's Root, Scare-Devil, Goat Weed, Sol Terrestis. Poisonous in excess, but a protector against melancholy when gathered at midsummer.

"Jonny couldn't housesit. He asked—" I began, then paused and swallowed, unable to think of a convincing lie. Must act, I thought: scoop up my bag and my precious Afghani coat and get out of here, quickly. Go home, take some tincture of hops to coax sleep, put off for a little while longer the realization that I would never see him again.

But I found I couldn't take my eyes from his—unblinking eyes, the pupils enormous. His lips had parted and he was breathing rapidly, almost gasping. I had seen that face before. It recalled someone having an exquisite hallucination. He was ecstatic.

Ecstatic or maybe out of his mind.

"Gabe? I need to show you something," I said, edging toward the bureau and my bag.

"You know my name," he said, very low. "You do—oh, God. Thank you." He stepped forward, still in his trance, and wrapped his arms around me. He, too, was trembling. He bent and pressed his forehead against my shoulder, releasing a long sigh. I heard an odd little strangled whimper: Gabe was crying. That was when my fear gave way to the abrupt desire that fear can sometimes evoke and I drew his face up to mine, kissing his mouth, fusing into his warm skin as I had imagined doing hundreds, no, thousands of times before. But I had never imagined feeling repulsion as well. A heady blend, hunger and disgust, but I was willing to follow wherever it led. After all, I had him at last, didn't I? Radiant, unique, and mine.

We lay on his bed. Gabe had pulled the sheet partially over us and pillowed his head in my lap. I stroked his tumbled hair, analyzing his scent: lemongrass cologne and recycled airline oxygen, with a trace of body musk. He was talking. He had been talking—when not whispering and sighing—for the last half-hour. He was much

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chattier than the artist manqué of my imagination. I tried not to listen to him or to think about what we had just done. I didn't want to think at all.

"—than it was before. I've never forgotten you. You've haunted me."

"Mmmm," I replied. "It's nice that I actually made an impression. I always wondered if you knew I was alive, or if you were just being polite to a customer."

He smiled indulgently, but his lids fluttered in a sudden nervous spasm as he tipped his head back to look me in the eyes. "Please don't joke. I mean it. You were the, the—crescendo for me. It took us fourteen years to find each other again, but we made it. I believe in fate now, in—"

My neck muscles tightened. "What are you talking about?" I interrupted.

Our eyes met again. "We—" Gabe began, shifting to sprawl next to me. His arm snaked around my shoulders, fingertips gliding over the tattoo.

"We *what?*" I said.

"Stop teasing me. We did this before. Fourteen years ago. June twenty-first."

We were both silent for a very long moment.

"Solstice," I murmured at last.

"That's right. The bar at Irene's. You liked the way I could quote Yeats."

Yeats. I hadn't read Yeats in years. I hadn't been to Irene's, a local folk club, for years, couldn't pass it without an inward shudder of discomfort. Fourteen years ago? I would have been in grad school in Portland, studying botany. Sometimes I came south to visit friends. Twenty-five years old I was that summer, with bright chestnut hair to my waist and a fondness for dark, lean men. Whatever led me to encourage that un-dark, un-lean, un-cool kid who stared at me as if I were the goddess incarnate? The one who knew Yeats and the Childe ballads by heart, and quoted them ad nauseam as the level in our wine carafe sank. He possessed a sweet tenor, though, and the mewling appeal of the young and the very unsure. Leon had just thrown me over for a blond sorority girl with a trust fund. I needed a little adoration, even callow adoration.

And how had the evening ended? I thought I knew, but I had taken care never to reimagine that narrow, somewhat malodorous room in one of the university co-ops.

Gabe was watching me, a line between his eyebrows. "You do remember, don't you?"

I emerged from my reverie and sat up, reaching for his discarded sweater. "You were majoring in English Lit."

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"Yes."

"I never did get your name, it was so noisy in the bar. You looked—different."

He grinned up at me. "Yeah. Thirty pounds heavier. No contact lenses. Dorky hair. Bad teeth. Shy as hell. You were the first woman I felt really comfortable with. You *listened* to me. Your eyes teared up when I sang 'Barbary Allen' in your ear. You made me feel like a—like a knight. Like a man, too," he added, flushing. "It was magical. It was my first time."

"Yes, I know." I turned my head away. So that tubby, stammering little man-child had transformed himself into my debonair Gabe, with his gleaming mane of hair and gray eyes, the easy smile, the lithe walk. How on earth had he managed it? And what had he done with his old self?

Heavens, he was at it again. Did the man never shut up? "—woke up and found you were gone and hadn't left a note or phone number. I cried like a kid." A nostalgic sigh. "I've been looking for you in every woman I've met since. I guess I've even tried to make myself over into the sort of man I thought you'd want."

"Why didn't you say anything when you saw me in Frontiers?"

"I just wasn't sure. It's been a long time, and the lights were so dim that night. You looked different, too. Your hair, now—the silver's beautiful, but I remembered its being reddish brown and flowing down your back. And you dress differently and you look much—I don't know, sadder. In a way, I didn't—" He broke off for a few seconds. "And you didn't seem to know me at all, even when I sang. I tried to find out your name, but you wouldn't bite. I even thought about following you home. What's so funny?"

"Nothing," I whispered.

"So when I came in tonight and saw your green coat in the hall, saw you and that little tattoo I always remembered, I can't tell you what it felt like. Like a miracle must. By the way," he added, tilting his head to one side, "would you consider growing your hair long again? I always remember the way it swirled around us that night." He pulled me down against the pillows. He was ready again.

I wasn't.

"Gabe, love," I said softly, "I'm feeling strange, like I might be getting a migraine. This is all kind of disorienting. Excuse me a minute. I've got a remedy on me somewhere."

With an effort, I made myself kiss his eyes before I arose from the futon, moving with deliberation so as not to alarm him. My mind was humming, swiftly, efficiently, as it did when I took inventory at the store. My bag in my hand. My coat was in the hallway; that and his sweater would have to do for clothing. Once in the bathroom, I could leave a tap running.

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I switched on the bathroom light, remembering to leave the door ajar, and turned on the cold water, hard. I leaned down and took a mouthful of it. Finally I forced myself to look into the mirror with its frame of crudely carved oak leaves. The hazy old glass softened the dark circles under my eyes, blurred my hair into a halo, dissolved the incipient lines.

Well, I thought, so that's Gabe. Gabriel. Gabriel Leland Morrison. Gabe, Gabe, Gabe. My muse, my passion, the core of my life. I closed my eyes and tried to picture him, to capture and hold fast for just one more time the mystery of the unique, the unknown, the unknowable. All I could summon was the unformed face of his younger self that I saw with a nauseating clarity. I couldn't see anything else, even when I opened my eyes.

"Gabe," I said aloud. "Gabe. Please come back." But I knew he wouldn't. He was gone for good and I was alone. I walked barefoot down the hall to where my green coat hung, and out the door into the dark.

I can remember very little about the next week or two. I had heard of the fugue state that afflicts certain people, times when they black out, sometimes leaving their usual lives or minds for alternative ones. Maybe that was my fugue time. After a day's absence, I forced myself to go to work and somehow functioned there, although now and then I'd glance over to find Rosemary or a customer staring at my remote eyes. I'd stare at them too when I happened to be near a mirror. Sometimes I didn't recognize myself.

The days flowed together; I had to concentrate hard to remember whether it was Monday or Tuesday or perhaps even Wednesday. When I wasn't at The Rowan Tree, I believe I mostly sat rocking, Albertine in my lap. What did I think about? Not about Gabe or myself. About nothing at all or unrelated matters. The long-ago spring I had spent hitchhiking around Scotland. Music: cello suites, country blues, old rock songs. Friends I used to know. The Latin names of plants.

I couldn't read without losing track of the text. I didn't answer the phone or listen to the messages on my answering machine. On May Eve, I burned the sweater and all of his papers.

So strange to have so little to do. No Friday vigils. No evenings at Frontiers. No paper to sort or dreams to dream, no fantasies to weave and embroider. Rather restful, but strange, like being perpetually high on ice water. I had always heard detoxification was painful, but I didn't find it so, merely numbing, alien. I couldn't envision any other life. I never tried to envision Gabe. I knew only too well whom I'd see.

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The Rowan Tree's front doorbell, Tibetan brass, tinkled. I smelled lemongrass and heard a light tread. I took my time reshelving the valerian jar. When I turned around, he was standing at the counter, a near shadow, back-lit by the afternoon sun.

"Leave," I said.

"No." I could just make out his tight mouth and watchful eyes, a face of him I had never seen before.

"Please leave. You don't understand what happened."

"No, I don't, but I damned well intend to."

"Look," I fumbled. "I'm not the woman you imagined. I'm not magical, I'm not even particularly nice. I'm probably more than a little crazy. You spent fourteen years dreaming about someone who doesn't exist."

"No, I did *not!*" he shouted.

A passerby glanced through the window at us. Gabe said in a near-whisper, "What do you want from me?"

"Nothing."

"What were you doing in my flat then? Don't give me a line about Jonny; he's never heard of you."

I came around from behind the counter and walked to the front door, closely followed by Gabe. I turned the Open sign around and locked up.

"Come back here," I said. "Please." We could sit in the small, dim stockroom where Rosemary and I blended teas, chatting companionably on our high stools. I would brew us a tisane and tell him the truth, which would, of course, make me free. I settled us with the tea and began the tale I had never told before. The months of vigilance and accumulated information and fantasy. The obsessional need to know more and more. The ruin of the fragile universe I had assembled with such care. I had so loved my idea of Gabe—my soft-spoken, beauty-loving, untalented, infinitely mysterious Gabe—just as he had loved his own image of me. Surely he would see that and understand that I had meant him no harm.

Gabe said nothing, not one word, during this recitation. He sat very still, clutching his mug, gazing at me, eyes as blank as a statue's.

I glimpsed the clock over his shoulder. I had been speaking for almost an hour. "I'm so sorry," I said. "Even though I know that what I did was beyond apology. All I want is for you to forgive me and I'll—"

I was about to say "stay away," but Gabe didn't let me finish. He was on his feet and embracing me, hard. "Christ, of course I forgive you. I love you. I even love what you call your craziness. It isn't craziness; it's passion. Most people don't ever feel that

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strongly about anything or anybody in their lives. But you do. I do."

"Gabe," I said against his chest. I felt cold. "You've heard too many songs."

"What was that?"

I opened my mouth. Then I looked into those gray eyes, dilating with emotion, and closed it again. There was nothing more I could say. For this moment at least, I knew he was beyond reason or self-preservation, even as I had been.

"—two people can play your game," he was saying.

"What does that mean?"

"How do you imagine I found out where you work?"

I thought of all the precautions I had taken and shook my head.

"A little brown bag in my mixed paper. 'Equinox, an herbal blend from The Rowan Tree,'" he recited. Gabe was delighted with himself. "I remembered that you were a botanist and knew about herbs, so I came over on my lunch hour to see if anyone here knew you. You were busy helping a customer. I was still so angry I didn't dare talk to you yet. But I took some time off work so I could sit at the café across the street and watch for you, follow you home. I must admit, though, I never thought of going through *your* recycling. That was a smart idea." His tone had grown avuncular; he was proud of my cleverness. "I thought some about revenge, too, about giving you a good scare."

"Why didn't you?" I asked.

"Because," he said, surprised, "I love you."

"You don't know me."

Gabe's face settled into a stubborn mask, but his voice was still tender. "I do know you. And I'm learning more every day. Uh-oh."

He jerked one arm from around me and checked his watch. "Damn. I'm due at work in ten minutes. I'll be in touch." He kissed the top of my head and made for the back door, then wheeled around.

"You won't leave town, will you?" he said. "Remember, I've got my eye on you." And he gave me his most radiant smile, the one I had always loved.

Gabe took to planting himself at Café Selene almost every morning for the next week, sitting at one of their sidewalk tables with coffee and an ostentatiously fanned newspaper. I ignored him. The recycling disappeared—from my back porch, yet—and I swore with frustration.

In the end, though, I did nothing, worried that any visible reaction would serve as encouragement. Anxious, too, about what he might do in retaliation. For Gabe had the advantage of me here. He hadn't admitted to stealing my recycled paper and regularly

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lurking around my place of employment for two years. He hadn't gained illicit access to my home and lived there for a week.

In fact, I was becoming frightened. I had trusted myself to keep my obsession under control, and after losing that control, I vanquished the obsession. Gabe was a different matter. His obsession was declared, obtrusive, a loose cannon. What did I really know about his mental health? What did his fourteen-year devotion to the memory of a one-sided one-night stand say about him?

Now I regretted burning his papers. There was something hovering at the edge of my memory, and I began waking in the middle of the night, trying to remember just what it was. Nothing as obvious as a dossier from the county mental hospital, but something. Something to do with women.

One night, sick of lying awake and speculating, I got up and went into the kitchen. Albertine followed, leaping onto the table to warm her fur in the lamplight, while I put the kettle on and opened a bag of chamomile. I joined Albertine at the table with pencil and paper.

"Women," I wrote and paused, reviewing the themes and motifs of his lyrics. "Dreams. Reality. Change. Light. Sorrow. Pain. Hurt."

Hurt. "I think I really hurt this one. Show Richard?" Was that what he had written in the margin of a song? It sounded right.

I tilted my chair back and let my mind float. All of Gabe's songs about disappointment in love. The fact that he was undoubtedly promiscuous, a term I had managed to avoid in the past, a word that meshed so poorly with his burnished voice and his love of beautiful things.

"I think I really hurt this one." Was that it? Did he indeed like to hurt women or feel compelled to do so? Would he like to hurt me, I who had rejected and pursued and rejected him yet again?

Two hours passed while I finished a pot of tea and thought, trying to remember every scrap of paper I had ever taken from his recycling. When I finally stood up, it was past dawn, already sunny and mild. I went back to the bedroom and looked in my bag's zipper compartment, half hoping the key would be gone, but of course it was still there. I plucked it out with a sigh. Time for one last vigil at Gabe's.

After calling The Rowan Tree's owner up at her farm on the north coast, I assembled some supplies. Then I brewed a thermos of coffee for my backpack and put on a hooded sweatshirt. I was suddenly dazed with nostalgia. It felt like old times. It was even a Friday.

I got into my car and took the familiar route, parking around the corner from my old place so that I could just make out his building. I settled the binoculars around my neck and poured a cup of coffee.

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He left, as usual, shortly after 8:15. A graceful, good-looking man, I noted, as I watched him deposit his recycling and adjust his sunglasses. How curious to think that he used to be the center of my world. I checked my watch again and began pulling on a pair of transparent latex gloves, the kind I used for delicate gardening and botanical work.

Ten minutes later, the bag full of his recycled paper was in my pack. It might contain some helpful information. When I let myself into the apartment, Arthel emitted a squeak of pleasure and tried to jump onto my shoulder. "Easy, Arthel," I whispered. "Easy."

I walked quickly down the hall to Gabe's bedroom. Where was the oval basket of sheet music? Not where I had first found it on the desk, not by the bed, not on a shelf. I counted to ten, turning in a circle as I did so. The bedside table, the CD rack, the sound system—the basket was on top of a speaker. I snatched up the sheaf of paper, fumbling through it, reading snatches of lyric out loud.

"Oh, no," I breathed. How had I missed that one? "'My breath, my lips, my fingers on your throat,'" I read aloud. And in the margin: "'I really hurt this one. Tell Richard?'"

Had he told Richard? Weren't therapists supposed to report such things to the authorities?

I continued shuffling through the songs and discovered something else: "'My pleasure becomes your pain, your own pain . . . '"

"'. . . remains yours.'" A sweet tenor had blended with my shaking voice, harmony of a kind, just before I found myself spun around and driven against the wall, Gabe's hands digging into my shoulders, his legs clenched on either side of my knees. He wasn't that much bigger than I, but he was angry and the stronger for it. I made myself look into his eyes, a few inches from mine. They were pale with rage and another, less readable emotion. I could hear both of us breathing in cadence, fast and ragged. Something—a picture frame?—dug into a vertebra. I swallowed and pressed my back against it even harder, trying to conjure up enough pain to displace the fear.

"Back off!" I said, in what I hoped was a snarl.

"No. Try talking to me for once! Is that really how you imagine me? Old psycho-killer Gabe? Dozens of battered women in my wake? Bragging about it in my lousy songs? Is that what you want me to be? Is it?"

"No," I said.

"Well, good," he snapped. "I've probably hurt a lot of women, but not in the way you're thinking. I don't hurt them intentionally. I promise them nothing. I give them nothing. I've been saving it all for you."

He stopped there. His hands relaxed by degrees, trailing down to my hips to pull me against him. "Do you believe me?"

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"Why should I? Look, all I know right now is that I want you to leave me alone. And that—" I stopped, tracking his gaze. He had drawn away and was staring down at my jeans, at the watch pocket, from which protruded the cap of a small brown glass vial. He glanced at my hands and then back at my frozen face. I said nothing; I was unable to. In a moment he had the bottle in hand and was perusing the label. He unscrewed the top, then sniffed the contents, examining me over the rim. I could feel my color changing, my cheeks growing hot.

"My, my, my," he murmured. "'Tincture of Hops.' And you're wearing gloves. All very sinister. What were you hoping to accomplish with this?"

"Knock you out," I said, praying this was the smart answer. "Long enough to get out of town, for a while at least. We both need to chill out. A few drops aren't all that potent, but the entire bottle would keep you on your back until tomorrow evening."

"And just where were you planning to put it?"

"In some mineral water in the fridge. I know you drink a lot of it."

Gabe closed his eyes and sighed. "Is there anything you don't know about me?"

Nothing but who you really are, I thought. I exhaled as well, suddenly tired but no longer frightened. Gabe screwed the cap back on and handed me the bottle. Then he opened a drawer of his desk. It was full of tapes, hand-labeled. He selected one and put it in the cassette player. "Listen," he said.

I sat down on his desk chair. He sank to the floor and watched me.

The tape crackled, as if it had been played many times. "January twelfth," a deep voice intoned. "Richard Savage and Gabe Morrison. So what's on your mind this week, Gabe?"

Gabe allowed as how his relations with women were still a critical issue.

"Why critical?"

"Because I still can't seem to stop the—pickups. The compulsion's as strong as ever. And this last time—"

"What about the last time?"

"Oh, Richard." A brief pause. "She was a nice woman. I wasn't going to approach her, but I'd had a second glass of wine, and suddenly there I was at her table, spewing my usual sensitive-new-age-guy line. And then I went home with her and left half an hour later, and I could tell by the look on her face how much—Richard, I really hurt her. I've got to stop this." Silence, followed by a barely audible aural blur that might have been tears.

I listened a few minutes more before I stood up and pressed the stop button.

"Okay," I said, leaning against the desk. "Assuming that you

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don't lie to your analyst, what am I supposed to do now? Commend you for just using women instead of beating them up?"

"No," he said quietly. "Just understand that we're not so far apart, you and I."

"I'll take that into account," I conceded. "But I want you to give up."

To my amazement, his mouth curved in a genuine smile. "I'll never give up. I know what I want, whether you do or not."

"How nice for you. I wish I were a true believer," I said. "Now go to work. And leave me alone."

"Oh, I'm going back to work in five minutes. Shadowing you has used up a lot of my comp time. But first let's do something with your little potion." He stood up and steered me toward the door and down the hall to the bathroom, where I ceremoniously flushed the tincture down the toilet.

"The key, too."

Damn. I handed it over. Then I turned blindly toward the mirror, considering his avowal. So Gabe thought he would never give up. He was as tenacious as I was—more so. I picked up his brush and tried to look absorbed, mindless, as I drew it through my hair. Gabe watched this feminine tableau for a moment, thumbs in his pockets, something like contentment in his eyes.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he said, so abruptly I almost jumped. "Whatever became of my mixed paper?"

We returned to his bedroom, where I had left my pack. Gabe clicked his tongue at the sight of its contents. "These are some hot shopping lists you're missing out on," he said, grinning at my sullen expression. Whereupon he headed toward the front door with the bag of recycling, and then it was my turn to smile.

When the phone in the kitchen rang seconds later, the brief conversation that ensued even gave me time to scan the engagement calendar on his desk. Satisfied, I fished the second bottle out of my backpack and emptied it into the raku carafe, my original target. Pure botanicals range in strength from the insipid to the deadly, so I always like to have a selection at hand, the better to suit my needs and circumstances.

My program was simple. Gabe's calendar noted that Jonny, Pete, and another friend would arrive that evening at 6:30 for a chili potluck and music session. There was nothing written in for the next day. Saturday nights he usually hit the clubs.

Thus, I reasoned as I drove off, he would be occupied at home all evening and probably go to bed about midnight, first dosing himself to compensate for eating and drinking too well. The bitters, of course, were a superb medium for my additive. I would have to keep watch that night to ascertain that my assumptions were correct and

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what time his light went out; I hoped for a period of at least eighteen hours during which no one would check on him in person.

As for me, I would spend the day packing and make my getaway by the early morning hours. For the next few weeks, while I attended to "urgent family business," Rosemary would manage the store with the help of our new intern and housesit my place as well. By sundown tomorrow, Albertine and I would be in Portland. We could easily find shelter there with various old friends; Linda, certainly. I would call her today.

Now, with as much care as I had lived in his home, I prepared to leave mine for—how long? A Gabeless future, I thought, inspecting my door and window locks, was not necessarily something I could count on. He had proved himself a resolute opponent, and smarter than I would have expected, given his pretty face and terrible song lyrics. I couldn't decide whether to respect him for these qualities or curse him for the upheaval he had wrought in my life, so I did both.

I leaned against the kitchen table and surveyed my list. There were two packed suitcases and one cat carrier in my entryway, and the car was full of gas, the oil and tires checked.

The telephone buzzed; perhaps it was Linda.

"Hello!" I said.

"My, you sound perky for a woman in trouble."

I couldn't speak for a few seconds.

"Gabe."

"Yeah, that's right, the old axe murderer himself. I suggest you get yourself over to Frontiers real soon."

"What happens if I don't?" I already had visions of the highway north.

"Then you'll be in deep trouble. You know, illegally entering someone's home and dumping drugs into his water carafe is just not a good idea."

"No," I agreed resignedly. "I suppose it's not."

"Please don't do anything that reckless again," he said. "Apart from the fact that I value my life, I really don't want to see you in distress."

We were sitting in the coffee bar at Frontiers, Gabe having explained sweetly that he preferred to negotiate delicate matters in public. "Less chance of anyone's getting nasty or hysterical," was the way he put it. "Including me."

I put on my best blank expression. "What kind of distress did you have in mind?" He assumed his too. "My friend Jonny has a sealed envelope I gave him this afternoon. To be opened in the

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event of my serious illness or death. Or when I ask for it back so I can show whoever might be interested."

"I see." I tried my best to appear stunned that he would think me capable of heinous intentions and acts, but I was also intrigued by this view of his character. He'd always seemed such a nice, straightforward young man.

"Why did you go home a second time?" I wanted to know.

"Well, I was in the stockroom checking on a new order of sci-fi this morning, and that set me remembering what you said about the little world you'd built around my marvelous self. Too bad my real self had to step in, eh?"

I looked at him then with undisguised loathing, but he didn't seem to mind.

Gabe continued, "I thought some more and realized how angry you must be at me for wrecking everything and turning your fantasy on its head, how much you must have wanted me out of your life. Then I remembered your expression when you were in the bathroom brushing your hair, an uncanny quality about your eyes. You might have been planning something: what else but how to finish whatever you'd come over to accomplish? And, finally, it occurred to me to wonder what you might have been up to while I was answering the phone. You see, I really respect your resourcefulness."

"Thank you, you schmuck."

He made a shocked face. "Watch your language! So I borrowed a coworker's car at lunch and went home to investigate. Just imagine my horror when I searched my bedroom and found this pale brownish liquid in the bottom of the water carafe I had emptied the night before."

"Oh, that," I said.

Sometimes the old remedies are the best: tincture of opium, a dose-dependent botanical, capable of inducing anything from a refreshing night's sleep to a brand-new incarnation. Gabe, during his raid on my back porch, must have passed within a yard of the tincture's source, my cherished bed of opium poppies, saucer-sized blooms as high as my head, magenta, carmine, and mauve. I hoped he had gotten rid of the tincture. Growing opium poppies is not illegal, but processing them is.

"Skullcap," I went on blithely. "Efficacious, shall we say, but not toxic."

Gabe gave me a very level look. "I am so glad to hear that."

"Don't you believe me?"

"Do you believe I beat up on women?"

I didn't reply. I must have appeared distressed; Gabe's eyes softened and he said, "Well—I can live with a little ambiguity if you can. I mean, I do love you unconditionally. However distasteful you may find that."

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"Are you serious?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid so."

We didn't say anything else for a while. There were only a few other people in the big loft, students mostly, hemmed in by books and papers and laptop computers. Thick bars of light sloped through the high windows, uplifting-movie light, I thought sourly, that elegiac, phony amber.

"So. What are my—options?" I said at last.

"They're, I mean, it's really pretty benign," he assured me. "I know you love your solitude and your cat and your plants, your work and all that. Amazing what you can find out about a person just by going through her suitcase and a couple of weeks' worth of recycling. I want us to keep in touch, that's all. I won't intrude on your life—not too much, anyway—and you won't have to interact with me any more than you usually have." Gabe paused before adding hopefully, "Unless you insist, of course."

I glared at him, unseeing, until I caught the glint in his eye. Just for a moment the awkward, adolescent Gabe receded. I had a certain respect for the fine art of negotiation. I've never been good at it myself.

Then he smiled, more to himself than me. "I think I kind of like this relationship," he said. "It's got rhythm."

"That's not all it's got," I muttered. "You're as sick as I am. *Was.*"

"Are," he said. "Oh, come on, stop scowling at me for a minute. Look, I know I've disappointed you. I know I'm not the brightest guy in the world. God knows I've got problems. But don't give up on me. Not yet." It wasn't a plea.

"Who are you?" I asked crossly. "The voice of the oracle?" Still, I sat for a long time over my coffee after Gabe eventually ambled back to the information desk. Every time I glanced his way, he was busy with a customer or the computer screen, going about his tasks with the old serene efficiency. Placid as a lamb in a meadow, I thought. The cunning bastard.

It's been two years since Gabe and I began shaping our agreement. Sometimes I think we resemble an old married couple: eccentric, set in our ways, as the saying goes, yet dependent on each other. At least once a week, I can count on seeing his familiar figure at Café Selene, wearing a gray fedora that makes him look like an arty gangster (and which I suspect he bought just to burlesque his new role, the joker). He always appears lost in his newspaper, but I know he's got his eyes on me. I never acknowledge him, of course, even when I stop by for my own morning coffee, but I can feel him there across the street as I smile and measure and label and bag.

(Business has been excellent, by the way, so good that The

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Rowan Tree's owner and I held a weekend open house last month to publicize the store's expansion and our new line of herbal products. At one point, I looked up from an aromatherapy demonstration and spotted Gabe inspecting a bottle of GLM, my latest tonic. He bought two, snagged a carob brownie, and departed, eyes bright with gratified vanity. We hadn't exchanged a word.)

I've had to discontinue my Sunday evenings at Frontiers, however. Gabe started managing a local klezmer band last year. He now does full-time management and occasional violin session work. He also displays a real aptitude for analyzing mixed paper, while I still look forward to my own Friday morning treasure hunts—more than ever, I was surprised to realize. The condom packages have all but vanished; as a gesture of appreciation, I will cancel my upcoming hair appointment. But I'm still pondering whether to let him know about my most recent project. He's quite capable of talking himself onto Thea's client list. Perhaps, instead of recycling her business card, I'll simply discard a page from my appointment calendar: "Therapy, 7:00 P.M." That would drive Gabe crazy.

And, late last spring, just on a whim, I happened to toss an oversized Post-it into my mixed-paper box. It read, "Friday, June 21, 8:00 P.M., the Round Meadow, Quercus Reach." The latter is a magnificent regional wilderness twenty-five miles north of town, known for its oak groves and waterfalls. I might leave a similar message this year. More than ever in this shifting world, certain rites must still be observed and certain forces honored, perhaps even enjoyed. ⊙

"LOOK OUT BEHIND YOU."

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On a Dead Man's Chest

by Michael Gilbert

Michael Gilbert's first stories for *EQMM* were published by *EQMM*'s legendary founding editor Fred Dannay. Dannay's admiration for Mr. Gilbert's work is shared by his successors at the magazine: We're delighted to be able to present our readers with the Fearne and Bracknell series, which demonstrates Michael Gilbert's exceptional ability to combine a complex plot with solid characterization. ¶

Storm warning, thought Inspector Flower.

He was a bright young man, and in this case reading the omens called for no great skill. His boss, Chief Inspector Mayburgh, had been out all morning talking to, or being talked to, by Superintendent Oliphant, the head of No. 2 Area East. Nor was Mayburgh a man who troubled to conceal his feelings. Mr. Piggin, the managing clerk of Fearne and Bracknell, had once described him as an old-fashioned rhinoceros who tried to get at the truth by butting it headfirst. When the chief inspector got back to his headquarters that morning he was clearly in a mood which called for butting someone or something.

He growled at Flower, "Would you say we were idle here? Would you perhaps suggest that we spent our time lying on our backs thinking beautiful thoughts?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"Underworked, with lots of time on our hands to chase any red herrings that District choose to throw at us."

At another time Flower, who was a precisian in speech as well as in dress, might have demurred at this grandly mixed metaphor, but not with Mayburgh in that mood. No, sir.

He said, "We've got more than enough on our plates."

Drugs, shoplifting, juvenile delinquency, arson, vandalism, mugging. You name it, they had it.

"So guess what happens?"

Flower, unable to guess what additional burden might have

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been laid on their shoulders by District, could only grunt sympathetically.

"I'll tell you what happens. Interpol. Yes, bloody Inter-bloody-pol sends a report to Special Branch, who forward it to Chief Superintendent Brace, who takes a quick sniff at it and hands it on to Oliphant, who skims through it and passes it down to us—for action. Action! They don't need action. They need a crystal ball to tell them what to do, and the Brigade of Guards to do it."

Having got this off his chest and paused for breath, Mayburgh condescended to produce some details.

"What the report says is that Interpol have had reliable information—reliable, you understand—that a contract killer has arrived in London, charged with an important mission by the Rome Mafia. He has been seen on one or two occasions—that's where the information gets a little less reliable—in this part of London. Would we therefore locate him, have him watched, and forward all information to Special Branch, since they have the responsibility for protecting the person, whoever it may turn out to be, that the Mafia are threatening. That's the job which has landed on our plate, at fifth hand, and which I'm now passing on to you."

"At sixth hand," murmured Flower.

"What was that?"

"I said it sounded sticky."

"Then it's up to you to unstick it."

"Have we *any* information about the victim?"

"Only guesswork. You'll have read in the papers that the Italians are trying to cut the Mafia down to size. A job they should have tackled long ago, in my opinion. The case has been dribbling along for nearly five years. But when it seemed, at last, to be approaching its climax, with the betting fairly level between conviction and acquittal, a new and important witness was unearthed. *If* he was prepared to face the publicity, his evidence could very well tilt the scales against the Mafia. This man, it seems, had been in England for some time and had therefore been comparatively safe—until the importance of what he had to say was suddenly realised. Upon which the Mafia decided that he must be liquidated."

"I understand that," said Flower patiently. "What I really wanted to know was whether we had anything definite to go on—about the killer or his victim."

"Since Interpol themselves didn't know the name of the victim, they could give us no help. In fact, they were asking *us* to help them."

"And the killer?"

"One of the men they think it might be goes under the name of

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Luciano the Limper. To distinguish him, no doubt, from Luciano the Lucky. Not a young man apparently. In his forties or fifties. But a very experienced operator."

"With a limp."

"So it seems. That should assist you."

Flower wondered how many men there were in London who limped. But he was not disheartened. He had worked on more slender information and had reached a solution. Had he not recently located a serial killer by the application of the science of psychological fingerprinting?

It seemed that the information had come to Chief Superintendent Brace from the head of Special Branch. A lofty exchange between chieftains. His own connections with that curious semi-political police force were at a much lower level. One of its junior officers, Martin Medhurst, had been at school with him and they had kept in touch.

Having sorted out his thoughts, he arranged to meet Martin at a well-known Fleet Street watering hole and explained the job he had been landed with.

"Typical buck-passing," agreed Martin.

"I don't see much chance of locating the Mafia killer. They've got a dozen crafty ways of getting into the country and friends to hide them once they're here. I'm only surprised he allowed himself to be spotted hunting round in our neck of the woods."

"Overconfidence?"

"Maybe. But what I thought was, if we couldn't pinpoint him, we might at least be able to identify his victim."

"Would be a step in the right direction," agreed Medhurst.

"The way I'd worked it out was this. First, if his evidence is going to be all that important he must be an important man himself. Both sides have been trotting out shady informers, men whose evidence could be bought for twopence a yard. One more like that wasn't going to make any difference."

Medhurst lowered his drink thoughtfully and said, "With you so far."

"Next point. This trial started five years ago."

"It was five years ago when they started pulling in the minor characters."

"Right, then I'm guessing our man must have been in England for around five years. Not much longer, if his information was going to be current enough to hurt. And not much less, or he'd have been picked off before he left Italy."

Medhurst said, "So you want me to look through our records and find an important Italian—"

"Or, more likely, a well-known Englishman living in Italy."

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"Right. One who came back here—around five or six years ago. It could be a longish list."

"We can cut it down further. The man must have a house in our part of London. That would be the reason for the killer to be hanging around. We're told he is a thoughtful operator. He was probably making a reconnaissance for the job."

"See what I can turn up," said Medhurst.

It was more than a week before he produced his answer. An anxious week for Flower, when he reflected that the killer must be poised to strike. On the other hand, he had been described as middle-aged and experienced. A man who had learned to take no chances, who planned his approach march carefully; his retreat even more carefully.

The information, when it did arrive, seemed so promising that Flower took it straight to the chief inspector.

He said, "I expect, sir, that you recognise the name Raeburn Bentley."

"Rings a bell. Well-known artist, isn't he?"

"He is indeed. He's spent most of the last twenty years in Italy, living it up with a Bohemian crowd in Rome, painting for his living, portraits mostly, and not making a lot of money until he came back here four or five years ago and did that thing which created such a sensation in the Academy. Called it 'The Gamblers.' A crowd of men and women round a roulette wheel, with faces that people had no difficulty in identifying. Just enough indistinction about them to save him from a libel action. A clever piece of work. He sold it for a very large sum to a firm of playing-card manufacturers. Financially, he's been up in the stratosphere ever since. When I add that he has a tiny house on Thameside, behind Southwark Cathedral—really only a studio, with an office behind it and a bedroom over it—"

"And no family?"

"There's a woman somewhere in the background and two kids. But they live separately."

Mayburgh, a puritan at heart, snorted his disapproval of this irregular arrangement. He said, "I fancy you may have spotted the right man. Living among the riffraff in Rome he could well have picked up information."

"And is important enough for anything he said to sound convincing."

"Yes, worth following up, certainly. Do we know anything else about him?"

"Only," said Flower reluctantly, "that his legal business is looked after by *that* firm."

He needed to say no more. At Cable Street Police Station, "that firm" meant only the partnership of Fearne and Bracknell, whose

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office was visible from their own top windows, and with whom they'd had, in the past, more than one difference of opinion.

Another branch of British officialdom was showing interest in Raeburn Bentley.

IRSID, the Inland Revenue Special Investigation Department, divides London geographically. North, South, East, West, and City. IRSID(E), which covered Southwark, Stepney, and other parts of the East End, was headed, at that time, by two industrious taxation ferrets; Albert Schwan and Leslie Jimpson. They were discussing, for the twentieth time, with frustration bordering on fury, the affairs of Mr. Raeburn Bentley.

"He never answers letters," said Schwan, "and when we invited him to an interview he talked all the time and we got nowhere."

Jimpson said, "The fact is that until he came back to this country he was dealing with Italian tax men."

"Italians, yes."

"Quite so."

The two revenue officials looked at each other. Their views, though unstated, were plain.

"However, now he's here, he must be brought to heel."

Schwan studied the thinnish folder on the table in front of him. "In four complete tax years, and part of a fifth, he has made no returns at all."

"Claiming that since he has no income, there is nothing to be returned."

"Which is patent nonsense. I have it on reliable authority that he got one hundred and twenty-five thousand pounds for that Academy picture, and he must have painted and sold four or five since."

"Well, we know how to deal with *that.*"

"Enrichment."

"Precisely."

The procedure which had been devised to cope with a person who claimed to have little or no income was simple. His style of life was examined and an estimate was made of the sort of income which would be necessary to sustain it. He was then assessed to tax on that amount. If he appealed, so much the better. The matter was now out in the open. The court would probably increase the levy.

"We know," said Jimpson, "that he maintains two households. The little studio on the river which he owns outright. And a flat which he leases for the Italian woman and two children. All in all, it can't cost him less than forty thousand pounds a year. Probably more. But we can use that for a start."

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"Right," said Schwan. "We'll collate the figures and institute the relevant procedure."

Unconscious of the fact that one of his clients was attracting the attentions of the Mafia, the police, *and* the Inland Revenue, Mr. Piggin, the managing clerk of Fearne and Bracknell, was working happily in his sunlit office. He was engaged in constructing a crossword puzzle, so large and so abstruse that it seemed unlikely that anyone would ever complete it.

He heard the ring of the bell and shouted out, "Mick!"

This produced Michael Donovan from a back room, a tall, thin boy whom Mr. Piggin had installed to run errands and look after such important matters as the purchase of stamps, tea, milk, and sugar. He had spent the first week of his employment concluding that he could not swindle Mr. Piggin and since then had behaved beautifully.

"See who it is," said Mr. Piggin as the bell rang again. "Tell them none of the partners are in."

When Mick came back, he was looking excited. This was unusual, since he modelled himself on Mr. Piggin, who never looked excited. He said, "It's a box. An iron box. A chest, sort of."

Mr. Piggin abandoned his puzzle unwillingly and went to the front door. In the street outside was a flat cart, drawn by a resigned-looking pony. On the cart, in solitary splendour, visible to a crowd of onlookers, was the chest.

"All right," said Mr. Piggin. "If it's for us, better bring it in."

"Take two people," said the driver.

"Give him a hand, Mick."

It was as heavy as it looked. Attaching themselves to the handles on each side, the driver and Mick dragged the chest off the cart and carried it into the front office where two girls suspended their typing to stare at it.

"Anything to pay?" demanded Mr. Piggin.

The driver said there was nothing to pay, but he had a letter for Mr. Fearne.

Mr. Piggin took the letter, the cart departed, typing was resumed, and the onlookers drifted off.

Francis Fearne and Bob Bracknell arrived back at the office that evening within minutes of each other, and Fearne found his partner examining the chest, with Mr. Piggin in attendance.

"Fine piece of ironwork," said Fearne. "Might be medieval. Valuable, I expect."

"What are we supposed to do with it?"

"The letter may tell us," said Mr. Piggin.

There was silence while Fearne read it. Then he said, "Good God!" and read it again. "It's from Raeburn Bentley. Listen to this.

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'I'm sending this chest to you for safekeeping. This letter authorises you to deal with it and its contents on my behalf in whatever way you consider most beneficial to me, my two children, Meta and Frederico, and their mother, Antonia. One word of warning. When you do decide to open it, do so with *great* care.'"

"And that's all?" said Bracknell.

"Raeburn was never a man to waste words."

"You know him well?"

"He was my father's client. I took him over when Dad died. Whilst he was in Italy, there was nothing much to do. Since he came back, my main efforts have been to persuade the Revenue that he's not subject to British tax."

"Five years. You'll have had your work cut out. Our tax people don't give up easily."

"They're hard on his heels. But Raeburn was always remarkably light on his feet. An exceptional man. Blessed with that perfect coordination between hand and eye that makes him such a fine painter. Particularly as a portraitist. His eye can pick out, in a flash, the essentials of a face, and his fingers can transfer it to the canvas. Incidentally, it made him, in his youth, a superb player of court games like tennis and racquets. He was also a fine target shot."

"An all-round man."

"Indeed," said Mr. Fearne, "but whether a good all-round man, or a bad all-round man, I was never quite able to decide. Well, it's been a long day. I'm for home, supper, and bed."

Mr. Piggin was normally first at the office and on this occasion he arrived shortly after half-past seven. He only beat Mayburgh by five minutes. The chief inspector apologised for calling so early, but explained that he himself had been up for most of the night. Had Mr. Piggin noticed the fire?

Mr. Piggin said, sourly, that he had been nearly run over by a fire tender swinging round a corner at speed. "I could have forgiven him if he was hurrying to a fire, but I imagine that by that time he was on his way home. How can we help you?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid. One of your clients, a Mr. Bentley—"

"Raeburn Bentley."

"That was the name. The fire was at his place. His bedroom was over his studio. Quite a small building on Thameside."

"And that was what was burned last night."

"Its owner, too, I'm afraid. The fire people found him—what was left of him—in his bed. They were far from satisfied that the fire was accidental and sent for us at once."

"What made them suspicious?"

"For a start, the smell of petrol. The bed Bentley was in—

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indeed, the whole room—seemed to have been soaked in it. Happily, the wind was blowing off the river and the front part of the building, mainly a ground-floor office, was preserved. It was when we were going through such papers as had survived that we came on a number of letters from your Mr. Fearne—"

"And here he is," said Mr. Piggin thankfully.

He retired to his own room. Not having known Raeburn Bentley well, he was not unduly upset by the news of his death. What was exercising his mind was the question of what they ought to do about the chest which had been so fortuitously deposited on them the day before its owner's death. Or was it fortuitous? Were the two matters somehow connected? He was still wondering about this when Mr. Fearne came in.

He said, "The inspector was quite civil for once. He seems to have heard about that box. I wonder how."

"I know how," said Mr. Piggin. "The people who saw it arrive will have been gossiping, and Mick will have told all his friends, who will have told all their friends. I'm only surprised the *Herald* hasn't been onto us."

His surprise was premature, but only by a few hours. One of their first visitors that afternoon was Bertie Dillon, star reporter of the *Southwark Herald.* Dillon, who knew Mr. Piggin, approached him cautiously.

He said, "I'd like to do a piece on it, if it wouldn't embarrass you."

"Since half London knows about it already, I can't see that it'd do much harm."

"I thought of referring to it as a mysterious coffer."

"Coffer," said Mr. Piggin thoughtfully. "Isn't that a little limiting? Coffer suggests money. Now if you call it a box or, better still, a chest, it might contain anything from a dead girl to a sack of rubies."

Bertie accepted the correction gratefully.

On the following morning, Mr. Piggin brought Antonia Bentley into the room of Fearne's daughter, Tara. He said, "Mrs. Bentley wants to talk to someone, and I'm sure she'd prefer that someone to be you."

It was one of the moments when he was glad that Fearne and Bracknell had a female partner.

Tara saw a little lady, perhaps in her late thirties, who looked like the sort of flower you might find in a hedgerow without being quite certain what sort it was. She was wearing a black band round the right arm of a springlike dress.

Tara said, "I am afraid my Italian is only schoolgirl standard. Perhaps we could talk in English."

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"English. Yes. I have been learned it well. For instance, I know that if I say something I should not say, which I often do, then I should start by saying, 'Parm me.' Is that not so?"

"Quite correct." Tara was finding it difficult to open the matters she wanted to establish. She said, "You have come to see us about Mr. Bentley. You were his—" How on earth should she put it? Girlfriend—lady friend—both impossible—she compromised. "You were his friend?"

"I was not Ray's friend. We were living in Sinne." She awarded the last word a capital letter and pronounced it with evident pleasure. "That is what you say, is it not?"

"I shouldn't say it myself. Because I don't think there's any sin involved. If I had to be formal, I should refer to you as Mr. Bentley's common-law wife."

"Common—law—I don't like that at all. I prefer Sinne. But let us, by all means, be correct. I will tell you that Ray asked me, many times, to marry him. I said no. If we are married we shall always be quarrelling. Sinne is better. Then we are comfortable."

The ice once broken, Tara soon extracted the facts she wanted.

"Twenty-seven Blenheim Mansions. That would be the flat Ray took for you and the children?"

"For Meta and Freddo, yes. You shall meet them. You will like them, I think."

"I'm sure I shall. Now, what about money?"

"For the present, I have no need of money. Ray placed five hundred pounds into my account in the bank. He did so three days ago."

For a moment, the thought that Ray had been alive three days ago and was now no more seemed likely to be too much for her and her face started to crumble. Then, with an effort, she pulled herself together.

"If I want more, I can come to you?"

"Of course."

"But if I come, I would like to talk to you and not to the terrible Mr. Fearne."

"Is that what Ray called him?"

"He called him many things," said Antonia, and started to laugh.

This made Tara laugh too. After that they got on well.

When she reported all this to her father, she said, "I can understand Raeburn falling in love with her. She has everything that would appeal to an artist. Colour, shape, and spirit. When she has spent the five hundred pounds Raeburn left in her account, shall we be able to help her?"

"I have got what amounts to a power of attorney. I expect we shall be able to find a way."

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Meanwhile, Mayburgh and Flower were studying the pathologist's report.

"Not that the fire left much for him to report on," said Mayburgh. "I see he concluded that the intruder surprised Bentley in bed, probably knocked him unconscious where he lay, soaked him and his bed and the floor round it with petrol, and set fire to it."

"Typical Mafia savagery," agreed Flower. "Does he give us anything on identification?"

"Not a lot. He goes into some detail about what was left of the teeth. A number of stumps and some places where the heat had melted a metal crown. If we could see his dental record . . ."

"From Italy. Would there be one?"

"They do have dentists in Italy. I suppose we could make enquiries through diplomatic channels."

Weed-grown, sluggish channels, thought Flower.

"Then there's this bit about the leg bones. These pathologists have got some clever formula for calculating the height of a corpse by measuring the arm and leg bones. The legs were saved to some extent by being wedged under the bedclothes. He estimates a height of five foot ten inches."

"About right," said Flower. "I remember standing behind Bentley in a crowd at the Academy and I'd have put him as two inches shorter than me."

Flower was a gangling six-footer.

"There's a note about a rib being cracked. Could have been by a revolver bullet."

"Why should he shoot him lying in bed?"

"Could be lots of other ways for a rib getting cracked," agreed Flower. "Are we going to let his solicitors have a copy of this report?"

"If that fellow Fearne,"—Mayburgh did not say fellow, but used a word starting with the same letter—"would take a step out of his way to help us, instead of doing everything possible to obstruct us, I might consider doing so."

On the morning that this conversation took place, Mr. Schwan arrived. He had telephoned for an appointment and Fearne had agreed, reluctantly, to see him. It appeared that he, too, had heard about the chest, though he did not refer to it directly.

He said, "I understand that Mr. Raeburn Bentley was your client."

"We acted for him," agreed Fearne. He was in one of his most unhelpful moods.

"Then it is in order for me to inform you that, immediately prior to Mr. Bentley's unhappy decease, the Revenue had a claim pre-

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pared for understatement of income during the last four completed tax years."

"A claim which you cannot now proceed with."

"Not against him, no. The claim now lies against his estate. For which, also, I imagine, you act."

"Perhaps you will explain exactly what you mean by 'his estate.'"

"I mean, of course, his executor. If he left a will."

"I know of none."

"Then, of course, there will have to be letters of administration."

"That is a matter for his family and the Probate Court. It is nothing to do with me at all."

This was clearly a signal of dismissal, and Mr. Schwan rose to his feet. Then, summoning up a smile which was so clearly false that it hardly rose from his mouth to his eyes, he said, "I am right, am I not, that you were a close friend?"

"No. His closest friends, recently, are all Italians."

"I meant, of course, his closest English friend. Or so I gather from something I read in the papers."

"If you are referring to the chest he deposited here, it should not be regarded as anything out of the way. Clients often deposit articles with their solicitors."

"Of course," said Mr. Schwan. "Of course."

The next thing to arrive was a letter from Messrs. Chatterway and Duxford, solicitors of Cannon Street, E.C. Its opening paragraph expressed the horror and regret—presumably of both Mr. Chatterway and Mr. Duxford—on hearing of the tragic circumstances surrounding the untimely decease of the celebrated artist Raeburn Bentley.

Then it got down to business:

> "We are instructed by Mr. Desmond Bentley, who is, we understand, the next of kin and the nearest surviving relative of the deceased. Since you had been acting for the deceased, our client has been in daily expectation of hearing from you. We appreciate that the suddenness and unexpectedness of the tragedy will have left you with many points to attend to, but we feel that some formal matters will now have to be disposed of. We refer to the probate of Mr. Bentley's will. If it exists, we have no doubt that it is in your safekeeping. If Mr. Bentley died intestate, then our client would be the natural person to take out letters of administration.
>
> One further point: We do feel that a careful inventory should be made of the deceased's effects. Much will

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have been destroyed by the fire at his house, but a man of his standing must have had assets of all sorts."

"So *they've* been reading about the chest," said Mr. Fearne when Mr. Schwan had departed. He had had it moved into his own office, where it stood in the corner, covered by a brightly coloured blanket. "The first thing is to make sure of this next-of-kin business. Could you slip round to Blenheim Mansions, Tara, and have a word with Mrs. Bentley. She won't herself have any claim in intestacy but I've no doubt she knows all about the family."

On her return Tara was able to produce the necessary details. Raeburn's father and mother were dead and Desmond was the only son of Raeburn's only brother, Brian Bentley. Brian, who had practised as a stockjobber, had died of heart failure when his main client lost all his money in Lloyds.

Robert Bracknell, who had wandered in when Tara was reporting—in that firm the partners spent as much time in each other's rooms as in their own—said, "I only met Desmond once, but he seemed to me to be a vintage example of a four-letter man."

"In any event," said Fearne, "we're not going to be hustled into making lists of assets for him. Why should we?"

It was, possibly, a coincidence that he should have been eyeing the chest as he said this.

That same morning Mr. Piggin emerged from the street door of the Fearne and Bracknell office and stepped out into the small square which also housed the offices of Ridolfi Brothers (General Agents), the Roaring Forties public house, and two or three tall buildings, once the houses of City merchants, but now divided and subdivided into flatlets and single rooms.

The recessed doorway of one of these was immediately across the square from Fearne and Bracknell, and Mr. Piggin, after inspecting it, stepped in and accosted the man who was standing there.

He said, "Surely they could have provided you with a chair."

The man said, "Whaddyer talking about?"

"I'm talking about you. You were here yesterday and have been here since ten o'clock this morning. Bad for your ankles, all this standing about. I've no idea why you're watching our office—"

"Oo said I was watching your office?"

Mr. Piggin ignored this. He spoke briskly, as one who had not a lot of time to waste. He said, "Your name is Gibbons—correct me if I'm wrong. You are one of the junior employees of Smedley and Company, private detectives. Captain Smedley is a very old friend of mine, and when I tell him that you've got such a limited idea of how to carry on observation that you're in danger of becoming a

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nuisance, he'll be very upset about it, and I think you'll be looking for another job."

"I'm not upsetting anyone," said the man, but he sounded upset himself.

"Not yet," said Mr. Piggin. "But if you become a permanent fixture in the square, people will start wondering what you're up to. And if they see that you are watching our premises, they might start wondering what *we* are up to. So might I make a suggestion? Go back to headquarters, explain the position to Captain Smedley—you can mention my name—Piggin—and tell him from me that there's an empty room in the next-door building which you could have for a modest weekly rental. You'll be no bother to anyone there and much more comfortable."

The man had nothing to say to this. After trying, unsuccessfully, to outstare Mr. Piggin, he swung round and shuffled off.

As was his custom when important decisions were called for, Mr. Fearne summoned his three partners and Mr. Piggin to a conference.

He said, "This Raeburn Bentley affair seems to be coming to some sort of climax. At least, I deduce as much from the fact that somebody has thought it worth paying money to have this office watched."

"Chatterway and Duxford," suggested Hugo.

"Possibly. But it would be so entirely unprofessional that I doubt it. It could be their client, Desmond Bentley."

"More than capable of it," said Bob Bracknell. "I hear he's been asked to resign from his club. Something about dubious tactics at the bridge table."

"But there are other possibilities. It's a curious fact that ever since we acquired that thing,"—he glanced at the blanket-covered object in the corner—"we seem to have become a focus of interest for a number of different parties. The police are the most straightforward. They think that Raeburn, fearing the worst, put some documents into it which would indicate the name of his killer. It might even contain specific evidence which would enable them to prevent the killer leaving the country, or would justify asking for extradition if he had got back to Italy."

"I don't think the police could force us to open the chest if we didn't want to," said Hugo. "But you mentioned other parties."

"Two, at least. And they are thinking on the same lines. They are both sure that this box is crammed with money."

"They have some reason for thinking so," said Mr. Piggin. "I've been making enquiries in the City and it does seem that, for some months, Raeburn has been liquidating his assets."

"The Inland Revenue. Basing themselves on a highly fictitious

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income of forty thousand pounds a year for five years and assuming a tax rate of fifty percent, they have raised an assessment of one hundred thousand pounds. It is clearly very much in their interest to find a fund of ready money to discharge this liability."

Hugo said, "The other party, I take it, is Desmond."

"Certainly. If he makes good his claim to his uncle's estate, it is comforting for him to suppose that it consists of ample and easily realisable funds."

"In short," said Bracknell, "all of them want you to open the chest."

"Bearing in mind," said Hugo, "the suggestion that it might be dangerous to do so. Some sort of explosive device, do you think?"

"Possibly," said Fearne. "But it doesn't worry me, because I've no intention of opening it. Unless they can think of some way of forcing me to do so, I'm in favour of a policy of masterly inactivity."

His four listeners considered the point. They were all trained lawyers. It was not easy to see what any of their opponents could do in the face of Fabian tactics.

"A necessary first step," said Mr. Piggin, "would be to apply to the court to presume Mr. Bentley's death. But that is a Chancery proceeding."

"However," said Fearne, "there is one matter in which we can, and I think should, assume the offensive. The insurers are contesting the claim which I have put forward on behalf of the estate. This is the sum of nine hundred thousand pounds, based on the value of the house and of six paintings which were in the studio. Mrs. Bentley has supplied us with a list."

"Are they really fighting," said Hugo, "or just being awkward?"

"Their refusal seems to be based on the supposition that Raeburn committed suicide, driven to it by the Mafia threat. And that he set fire to the house himself. Not a very plausible defense. I have a feeling that if we stick to our guns, they will pay up or compromise."

"Of course we must stick to our guns," said Tara, speaking for the first time. "Insurance companies are bullies. If the insured is a small man, they hope that he'll be too poor or too scared to litigate and will run away."

"Not in this case," said Mr. Fearne. "I assure you."

"It's a bloody scandal," said Desmond Bentley, "a flaming bloody disgrace. There's that old bastard, Fearne, sitting like a dog in the manger on a heap of stuff and snarling when anyone comes near it. There *must* be something we can do."

He was addressing Aubrey Duxford, the senior partner in the firm of Chatterway and Duxford. The only other person present was their most recent acquisition, a clever Jewish lad called Samuel Bax. So far he had offered no contribution to the discus-

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sion. Most of the talking had been done by Desmond.

"What we've got to do," he said, "is to get old Fearne in front of the Court. When the judge starts asking him awkward questions, he'll have to answer up, won't he? Isn't there something called contempt of court? I was reading the other day of a case where a man refused to answer up and he was sent down for six months, with hard labour."

He was clearly delighted at the thought of Mr. Fearne chipping stones in a quarry.

"The difficulty," said Duxford, "is that to get someone into court, you have to commence an action of some sort against him. And I can't see how any action can be begun until we have obtained a legal presumption of Raeburn's death."

"For God's sake," said Desmond, who was fast losing his last vestiges of self-control. "Surely the dumbest lawyer would agree that when a man's burnt to death he ceases to exist. Where do they think Raeburn is now? Flying round somewhere with a harp in his hand and a halo round his head? Though if half the stories of what he got up to in Italy are true, he's more likely to be sizzling down below."

"We did consider the possibility,"—Mr. Duxford looked at Bax, who gave a fractional nod of the head—"of saving time by instituting a form of double action. It would begin with an application before a Master in the Chancery Division to presume death. But we could join it with a further application. In the event of no will being produced, we would ask for an order recognising you as the proper person to take out letters of administration."

"And how long would this rigmarole take?"

"Chancery proceedings are never speedy. If we were lucky, we might get our order in six months."

Mr. Duxford feared for a moment that Desmond was going to have a fit. His face was scarlet and he seemed to be having difficulty in breathing. Then he managed a single tortured breath and said, "You may not be aware of this, but I have been having that office watched. And it has been reported to me that that bitch Mr. Bentley picked up in Italy has been round there three times—three times—in the last fortnight. And it doesn't need much guessing what she went there for. And got. A handout from the money in that chest. In other words, whilst we've been sitting round doing Sweet Fanny Adams, money that should be coming to me has been dribbling out of the estate like water out of a leaking tap."

"If I might," said Bax gently.

The interruption brought two heads round towards him.

"As I understand the problem," he said, "what is wanted is some speedy action to bring this deplorable state of affairs into the open."

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Both listeners nodded.

"What I am going to suggest may sound unusual, but I believe, from what I have heard, that you would have the backing of both the Metropolitan Police and the Inland Revenue, which must add weight to your contentions."

As he outlined his idea, Mr. Duxford had the look of a man who is doubtful, but is prepared to be won round. Desmond was, quite simply, delighted.

Whilst their opponents were planning their next move, the partners of Fearne and Bracknell were quietly carrying on their practice and dealing with a wide variety of matters; a variety which arose from the location of their office on the borderline between the City and the East End. "On one side," Fearne used to say, "legal crooks; on the other, simple crooks." He much preferred the simple variety.

Tara found herself devoting an unusual amount of her time to Antonia Bentley, of whom she had become very fond. As for Mr. Piggin, he seemed to be occupying such leisure as he had in a search through old files.

Solicitors are unwilling to throw away anything, and the storage of old files presents a permanent headache. When there was no more room for them in the office they had purchased an unused drill hall, equipped it with shelves, and loaded the shelves with forgotten matters. Among them Mr. Piggin had browsed happily, evening after evening.

He had now delved back to the time of Mr. Fearne's father and had unearthed a number of facts about the young Raeburn, then at the outset of his painting career. One yellowing letter of thirty years ago had interested him so much that it took him on a visit to Southend-on-Sea. He was there when a letter arrived at the office which was so important that it was delivered by hand.

It was from the Law Society's headquarters in Chancery Lane. It came quickly to the point:

> "A complaint has been lodged with us which alleges that, in the case of R. Bentley, deceased, you have so conducted yourself as to obstruct the normal process of law. In particular that, although it was clearly open to you to do so, you have not, in the two months intervening since the death of the above deceased, made any approach to the Court to presume death and that you have ignored a number of letters from the complainant, Mr. Desmond Bentley, the nephew of the deceased, requesting you to assist him in the taking out of letters of administration and in listing the assets of the estate.

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You are invited to give such explanation as you wish to the Disciplinary Committee sitting at No. 34 Carey Street at ten in the morning on 2nd November."

By the time Mr. Piggin returned from Southend, the partners had discussed this bombshell in all its aspects.

"It's not a bomb," said Robert Bracknell, "it's a torpedo. An underwater, underhand, unjustified attack."

"I don't know," said Mr. Fearne. "I suppose we *have* been a bit dilatory, but all the same—"

When Mr. Piggin was shown the letter, he said, "One thing's clear. We must get a copy of that pathologist's report."

"In the light of this development the police can hardly refuse it," said Fearne. And, in fact, on the following afternoon several copies arrived with Inspector Flower's compliments. Mr. Piggin studied the one that had been handed to him with great care and underlined two sentences in it.

The Disciplinary Committee of the Law Society is both a statutory body and a domestic tribunal, which writes its own rules and follows its own, often informal, procedures.

On this occasion an unusually powerful trio had been summoned to deal with what was clearly an unusual charge. It was headed by Mr. Charles Grey, Q. C, supported by two well-known city solicitors, Mr. Archibald and Mr. Lyon-King.

One result of informality was speed. Cases rarely took more than a few hours. On this occasion, Mr. Grey had presented Desmond's complaint—very fairly, Fearne considered—and various statements in support of it had been read before the lunch break.

When the tribunal reassembled, Mr. Fearne was invited to address it.

He said, "I am well aware, sir, having served here on one occasion myself, that it constitutes an unhappy and unproductive interference with the work of a lawyer as busy as, I am sure, all you gentlemen are."

He distributed a polite smile round the table.

"I will therefore be brief. First, I should wish this report by Dr. Vinelott, the county pathologist, to be accepted as it stands. I can call the doctor to prove it formally if you wish."

Having collected nods from his confreres, Mr. Grey said, "You may proceed on that assumption."

Fearne said, "Then I invite you particularly to consider the study of the leg bones—final paragraph on page two—and the dental details—second paragraph on page four. After which I will, if I may, call my only witness."

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There was an interval while the tribunal looked at the report. Mr. Piggin was pleased to observe Mr. Lyon-King underlining the same sentences that he had himself picked out.

The chairman said, "We are ready for your witness, Mr. Fearne."

The witness was an elderly man, bald, but showing few other signs of age. He perched sedately on the chair offered to him. Fearne said, "To start with, some matters of record, which will not be in dispute. Your name is Patrick McClellan. You are a qualified dental surgeon and were in practice in Southend for forty-five years."

"Quite so."

"One of your earliest patients was the artist Raeburn Bentley."

"The celebrated artist," amended the witness.

"Oh, certainly. Since that time he has become very well known indeed. I have taken the liberty of photocopying that section of your notes which you kindly entrusted to me. They are notes you made at the time, in the course of your practice?"

"Certainly. Copies of them had to be available to the District Dental Committee. You will observe the signature of their secretary in the margin."

"Thank you. But before going further into the matters dealt with in these notes, I would like to clarify one important point. Did you attend to Mr. Bentley at any time *after* his return from Italy?"

"There was no reason for me to do so. But I did, in fact, see him once. I had, by that time, retired, but he asked me to attend to a small adjustment of the plate which I had inserted after that major operation more than twenty years before. As an old friend, of course, I agreed."

During this exchange the tribunal had been trying to do two things at once. To listen to what was being said and to decipher the page of handwriting which had been placed in front of them. The writing was not as bad as the average doctor's, but needed care.

"And what you describe as a major operation is the matter referred to in these notes, is it not? Perhaps a word of explanation—"

The tribunal nodded gratefully.

Mr. McClellan said, "When I originally examined Mr. Bentley I had found, as you will see, that he was suffering from advanced and serious pyorrhea—or, to use a lay expression, gum rot. It should have been attended to much earlier, but"—this with a dry smile—"like many people, he deferred his visit until the pain had become intolerable. I saw at once that it would be necessary to remove all his teeth and, after treating his gums with an injection to

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accelerate the hardening process, I fitted him with a complete set of false teeth. Successfully, I think, since they only had to be adjusted twice. Once in Italy, and once, as I mentioned, after his return here."

The tribunal, whose eyes were flicking between the pathologist's report and the dentist's notes, were beginning to understand what they were being told.

Mr. Grey said, "Has the witness seen the pathologist's report?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I will ask him one question which may resolve a number of our difficulties. I take it that you are certain, sir, that the body referred to in that report was not that of Raeburn Bentley."

"Oh, quite certain. The reference to roots of some teeth, and other teeth whose capping had been melted by the fire, makes it impossible to suppose that the same man was the subject of both reports."

"And that," said Fearne, "was that."

Bob Bracknell said, "I understand that the chairman actually congratulated you on resisting an application to the Court which might have resulted in an embarrassing series of errors."

"Indeed. He was so grateful that he even invited me to explain—although the matter was not really in front of them—what I thought had happened. In measuring the leg bones, the pathologist made a comment the significance of which seems to have been overlooked. He said that one leg seemed to have been two inches shorter than the other. I was able to suggest, therefore, that the man found in the bed might have been Luciano the Limper. This led to the further suggestion, which the tribunal was able to accept provisionally, that Bentley had rolled out of bed without being seriously burnt and had knocked his assailant into it. He was, after all, a powerful and active man."

Hugo said, "Anyone who had seen him play racquets would certainly agree with that."

Tara was not interested in racquets. She said, "Surely there's something more important. The tribunal's conclusion disposes of Desmond. Wipes him right out. Excellent. But didn't it do something even better? It knocked out the main plank of the insurance company's defenses—that Raeburn committed suicide. If the facts surmised by the tribunal are accepted, the insurers will have to pay up."

"That aspect of the matter had not escaped me," said Fearne.

The week that followed was a busy one for the partnership. The conclusion of the Disciplinary Committee left the insurance company with no real defense. However, having admitted the claim, they proceeded, as usual, to haggle over the details, particularly about the value to be attributed to the lost paintings. Ultimately, in order to avoid a full-scale dispute with art experts on both sides, Fearne agreed to accept £750,000 against his claim of

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£900,000. Armed with this sum, he had tackled Albert Schwan and Leslie Jimpson. Aware that the Revenue case was based on theory rather than fact, they had been glad to accept a cash payment of £80,000 in discharge of all unpaid tax.

"Which leaves us," said Fearne, "with a very handsome balance that we can use to assist Mrs. Bentley. A substantial interest-free loan perhaps. Tara, you have her address. You'd better call on her and explain the figures."

When Tara returned it seemed there was a snag.

"She's gone," she said. "Pulled out, with the children, two days ago. Paid up the rent and anything else that was owing and vanished."

"Is there no end to the complications of this matter," groaned Bob Bracknell. "Just when I thought we'd got it all straight."

"This isn't a complication," said Fearne. "It's a signal that I've been waiting for. Now we can open the chest. In view of Raeburn's warning, I think I'll get Mr. Hamlet to do it for us. He understands these things."

The opening took place in the presence of all the partners and Mr. Piggin. Michael Donovan, who attempted to insert himself, was summarily expelled.

Mr. Hamlet had brought a quantity of apparatus with him in his van, including an outsize weighing machine. The chest was hoisted onto it and its weight was recorded.

Mr. Hamlet's next move surprised them. Attaching an electric drill to one of the office power sockets, he proceeded to make a hole in the lid and in each of the four sides. Then he had the chest turned over and drilled a hole in the bottom. After which he proceeded to measure the chest, minutely, in every direction.

He said, "As you can see, this chest is a simple piece of work. Four sides, a base, and a lid. If you look closely you can see there was originally a handle on the lid, which has been removed. The lid is now kept in place solely by its weight and the tightness of its fit. It will need a bit of rough work to get it open, but first I have to complete these calculations. Perhaps you would like to check them with me."

The paper was covered with figures which meant nothing to his audience.

"Before I came here I obtained a piece of this type of iron—known in the trade as second-milling pig—and was able to calculate its size-weight ratio. By drilling these six plates to discover their thickness, and measuring them externally, I have been able to calculate the weight of each. Added together, with an allowance for the two side handles, they must clearly be equal to the weight of the chest."

While the partners were staring, in total incomprehension, at the figures, Mr. Hamlet had armed himself with a steel chisel. This he positioned at the edge of the lid and proceeded to give it a succession of powerful blows with a hammer.

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His audience drew back.

"Don't be frightened," said Mr. Hamlet. "If you have followed my calculations you will see that there is no possible cause for alarm. The two totals correspond so closely that one can only conclude—" he inserted a steel claw in the gap he had made, pressed on the end of it, and raised the lid, "—that the chest is entirely empty."

Hugo said, "Well, if you understand it, I don't. I think you might explain it."

"Compose yourself in patience," said Mr. Fearne. "I am awaiting a letter. It must come quite soon."

The letter arrived three days before Christmas. It had clearly passed through many hands and gave no clue as to the country it had come from.

> "My dear Francis," wrote Raeburn, in his beautiful artist's script. "I really was sorry for Luciano. He was on a hiding to nothing. I had more friends in London than he did. They kept an eye on him from the moment he arrived. He, naturally, made all preparations for a quick exit when he had done his job, and it was these preparations that themselves indicated the day, almost the hour, of his visit to me. He was totally ignorant of the sophisticated alarms which I had installed. They announced his approach, his entry into the house, his ascent of the stairs to my bedroom. I was using my favourite .22 target rifle with supercharged ammunition. I had only to fire once. The bullet must have entered his heart bag, been deflected by a rib, and emerged from his back. Since he had brought ample supplies of petrol with him, I cremated him on the spot.
>
> So far, so good. But there were many other matters to be attended to.
>
> Most of my money was on its way from my Swiss accounts—your Mr. Piggin has details of them—to the country I had selected for my retirement, but there were still some arrangements to make there. More importantly, I had to conclude my negotiations with the authorities of that country to persuade them to accept Antonia and the children. Money opens most doors, but it all took time.
>
> Above all, I wished to divert the English authorities, if they suspected that the body was not mine, from taking steps which might have shown them the truth. They could, for instance, have made a painstaking search of the ashes and discovered the .22 bullet. They

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could have monitored my Swiss accounts and, worse, could have kept a watch on Antonia, hoping she would lead them to me.

I did not wish them to take any of these steps.

When I played racquets, I found that if I could induce my opponent to take his eye off the ball, I could probably defeat him. I therefore organised a diversion which would, I hoped, take the eyes of the police, the Revenue, and my unspeakable nephew, Desmond, off what I was doing. In short, I presented them with an attractive alternative. A treasure hunt.

The chest was one I bought some years ago as a prop in a picture I was painting. I felt sure that if it was delivered to you, with maximum publicity, they would be round it like wasps round a jam jar.

I knew, too, that I would gain all the time I wanted. I knew that whatever pressure might be brought to bear on you, the most obstinate and obstructive solicitor in London, you would hold them off and give me the time I needed to tidy up the loose ends I mentioned above.

Please submit an appropriate bill and pay yourselves out of the money you hold before remitting the balance to Switzerland."

"Well," said Hugo. "Isn't that splendid. Everything tied up, *and* our bill paid."

His father said, "What are you looking so upset about, Francis? Is it the fact that the insurance company has been induced to pay a large sum of money under a misapprehension?"

"Certainly not," said Fearne. "They paid as a result of what *they* concluded had occurred. It wasn't for us to put forward an alternative version. Indeed, by instituting proceedings we gave them the opportunity of having the whole matter thrashed out in court. But they ran away."

"Then what is bothering you?"

"It's the next-to-last sentence in Raeburn's letter. Would *you* describe me as obstinate and obstructive?"

"Certainly not. Never. The idea's absurd," said his partners. O

NOTE TO READERS: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is now on the Web! In addition to excerpts of upcoming fiction, our page provides a short history of the magazine and a list of *EQMM*'s many awards. We share the site with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Mystery Scene Magazine,* and links have already been established with several other mystery pages. It's *the* web site for mystery fans: Don't miss it! Visit us at http://www.mysterypages.com

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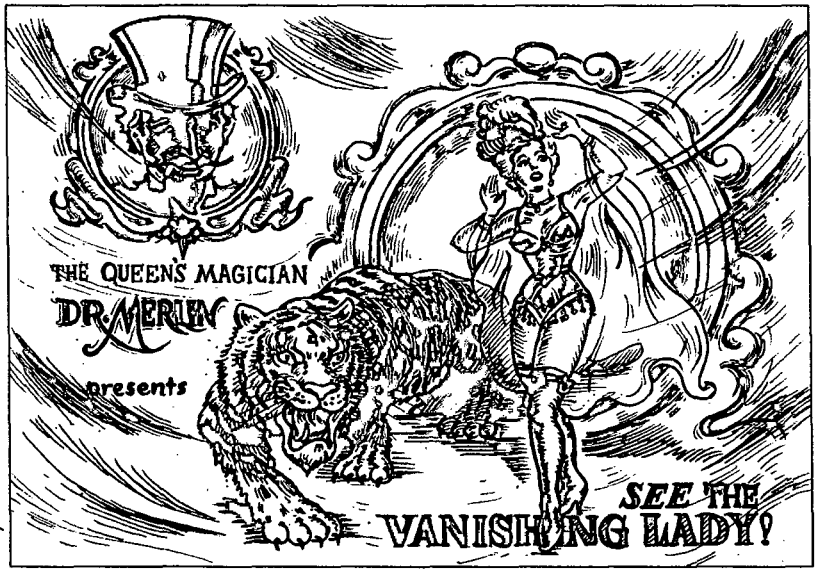

Art by Mark Evan Walker

THE QUEEN'S MAGICIAN

by Edward D. Hoch

Madge Keene arrived for the audition wearing her best black skirt, carefully hemmed to reveal just enough of her shapely ankles. Madge considered those ankles one of her best features, and she was a bit disappointed when Dr. Merlin gave them not even a glance.

"Do you understand what the position entails, Miss Keene?" he asked. He was a slender man with an almost sinister expression, made more so by the stage makeup he wore.

"I—I think so," she replied.

"We are just two weeks away from the beginning of the twentieth century. Here in London, so close to the Greenwich meridian, numerous special celebrations are planned. As the Queen's Magician, I will offer a spectacular magic show exactly at midnight. This audition today is to find a new assistant for my act."

"I understand that. It won't be dangerous work, will it?"

He gave a snort of laughter. "No, no, my dear girl! Other than being bitten once or twice by the tiger, you should be perfectly safe."

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"Bitten!"

"I jest. Come, lift your skirts so I may see your legs. You understand you will be wearing tights and spangles on stage?"

"I—yes. I've seen your posters around the city. Are you really the Queen's Magician?"

He smiled at her, trying to present a friendlier image. "Victoria is a great fan of magic shows. There are many prestidigitators who have claimed over the years to be the Queen's Magician. As with Dr. Holden and Dr. Lynn, I have performed before Her Majesty for more than a decade. I have as much right to the title as they have. When I perform my famous Vanishing Lady illusion at midnight on December thirty-first, I hope to have Victoria in the audience."

We conclude our first issue of the twenty-first century with a tale that recreates the anticipation and uncertainty surrounding the turning of the last century. *EQMM* can think of no one better to pen a tale in honor of the new year and the new millenium than Edward D. Hoch, an author whose contributions to twentieth century crime writing have been magnificent and from whom we expect great things in coming years.

"Some say she is near death," Madge said reverently. Her mother had always taught her to show respect for the royal family.

"Any person of eighty-one years is near death," Dr. Merlin agreed. "Still, we can hope. You may lower your skirts now." After asking a few questions that established she lived alone in London, he said, "You have the job."

She was delighted to hear it. At nineteen, barely out of school, she longed for a life in the theater. "What will I be doing? Assisting with your illusions?"

"Young lady, exactly on the stroke of the twentieth century I intend to make you vanish from a cage and be replaced by a tiger."

"It sounds scary," she admitted, though she knew it was only a trick. Then, "You know, I celebrated the twentieth century a year ago, even though our government said it didn't start until nineteen-oh-one."

"That doesn't matter. It's an excuse to celebrate twice."

"Will you show me how the trick works?"

"Of course. I want to rehearse it this week, before the long Christmas weekend." The holiday was on Tuesday, followed by Boxing Day on Wednesday, and little real business would be transacted on Monday. "Suppose we meet day after tomorrow and I'll introduce you to my tiger."

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"All right," Madge Keene answered, just a bit apprehensive, wondering for the first time what she might be getting herself into.

That night she told her American friend Gregory about it. He was a merchant seaman, good with his fists, but as he told her, "I'm not much help against tigers."

On Wednesday afternoon Madge walked through slushy London streets to the small theatre near Soho Square where Dr. Merlin would be performing. It was not an area for a young woman to be walking alone, and she remembered her mother's frightening tales of people who vanished, never to be seen again. When she reached the theater she was greeted enthusiastically by the magician, wearing black pants and a loose-fitting shirt of white silk, moving among a half-dozen male assistants who worked mainly backstage during his act. "Madge Keene! It is so good to see you! I feared all this talk of a tiger had turned you against us."

"No," she said. "I want to get into theatrical life."

"This is your perfect opportunity. Come and meet the beast!"

Madge approached the cage with some trepidation, eyeing the great Bengal tiger a bit uncertainly. "I have to be in the same cage with that?"

Dr. Merlin chuckled. "Not this cage. Come, I'll show you the cage we use on stage. You see, the tiger represents the new century, while you will symbolize the follies of our youth."

"I will?"

He led her over to a larger cage on a wheeled platform. A separate staircase was rolled out by one of the assistants and Merlin himself hurried up the steps to open the cage door. He stepped inside, bending almost double to squeeze through. "This will be much easier for you," he assured her. "You will be inside and I will lower a curtain over the entire cage. Then—"

Madge gasped as the magician yanked at the rear of the cage, pulling it down after him as he dropped through a trapdoor in the floor. She realized now that what appeared to be the cage's back was really a partition, hiding a space better than a foot deep. This now became the cage's floor, and a tiger hidden in that rear compartment would have the entire cage to himself.

"But what happens to you?" she asked Dr. Merlin.

"Simple, my dear girl." He disappeared through another hidden door in the base of the staircase they'd wheeled out, and it was promptly rolled offstage. He returned immediately and said, "Now get into your costume so we can see how it fits."

Madge thought the spangled tights more appropriate to a dance-hall performer than to a magician's assistant, but she donned them gamely and allowed the seamstress to take a few stitches.

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When she returned to the stage she could see at once that Dr. Merlin approved. "Perfect, my dear! Now let's run through the trick from the start, but without the tiger."

She was a fast learner, and in no time she'd mastered the technique of entering the cage, waiting until the curtain dropped around it, and then exiting through the trapdoor while she pulled the false wall down to release the tiger. Then into the space beneath the stairs, to be wheeled off by the assistants. After a half-dozen run-throughs she was ready to try it with the real tiger. "Don't worry," the magician assured her. "Susie is quite tame. I've performed this illusion with her a dozen times." He brought the tiger out on a gold leash to introduce them to each other.

Still, it was with a trace of apprehension that Madge mounted the steps and entered the cage, knowing a live tiger waited just the other side of that false wall. She managed to slip most of the way through the trapdoor before pulling down the false wall and releasing the beast. Then she scurried into the staircase trapdoor and shut it. She felt the hiding place rolling away, pushed by Merlin's assistant. Once off stage, he opened the door and helped her out. His name was George Jamel, a dark-haired man in his thirties with a ready smile and soft hands. "There! That wasn't so bad, was it?" he asked.

Madge glanced back at the cage, where Merlin had just whisked away the curtain to reveal the pacing, restless tiger whose name was Susie. A few of the stagehands applauded and the slender magician gave them a mocking bow. He walked over to Madge and told her, "We'll have a full dress rehearsal next Thursday, just after Boxing Day. Jamel will give you the time."

Madge left the theater feeling as if she owned it. Even the wet chill of the December day could do nothing to dampen her spirits. She passed a news vendor's stand and saw headlines about the latest British victory over the Boers in South Africa. We are winning at last, she thought. Everything is going right today.

Though still late afternoon, it was growing dark. The electric lights in shop windows, brighter in this area than the old gaslamps that still lined the street, seemed to heighten the festive look of Christmas. She thought of taking a motor-cab home, but knew the new electric underground tube, the Central London Railway, ran only blocks from her flat. With the few pence saved, she could stop for afternoon tea in one of the shops she was passing.

Without a second thought she entered the next doorway, hung up her coat, and chose a small table off to the side, ordering scones and a pot of tea. Before they arrived, a middle-aged gentleman wrapped in a heavy coat and scarf entered the shop and came up

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to her table. "I'd like to speak with you, Miss Keene. May I join you?"

Madge was momentarily taken aback. There were several empty tables in the place. "Do I know you?" she asked.

He unwrapped the scarf from his neck and showed his identification. "I'm Inspector Snell from New Scotland Yard. It's quite important."

"Have I done something?"

His smile put her momentarily at ease. "I certainly hope not." He was a man in his forties, about her father's age, with a small purple birthmark on his left cheek. He hung up his coat and sat down opposite her. "I hope you'll excuse me for following you. As you'll see, it's a matter of great importance."

"You followed me from the theater?" she asked.

"I did. We've been looking into the activities of Dr. Merlin."

"He's a magician. He performed before Queen Victoria."

"We know that."

"And he's going to change me into a tiger during his Twentieth Century Show on New Year's Eve."

Inspector Snell nodded. "I was in the audience when he last performed the trick, back in the summer. Did he tell you what happened to the girl he used then?"

Madge frowned. "No. What happened?"

"We don't know, Miss Keene. She disappeared and has not been seen since that performance. As a matter of fact, he has performed the Vanishing Lady illusion seven times in the past three years. None of the girls who vanished has ever been seen again."

The sound of his words numbed her with their implication. Her first reaction was to brush them away as meaningless. "That's impossible," she said firmly. "People don't just disappear."

"I'm afraid they do, every day in a city the size of London. It's especially true of stage and music-hall performers, young women like yourself who come here without family ties."

"And you believe Dr. Merlin is responsible for the disappearance of his assistants?"

"Without doubt. We just don't know what he's doing to them."

Madge tried to make a joke of it. "Feeding them to the tiger, no doubt."

"We have considered that possibility," he answered in all seriousness.

"Did you question him about these disappearances?"

The waitress brought her tea and scones, along with a second cup and saucer for him, and he waited until she was gone before he answered. "One problem is that we didn't realize anything was amiss until after the sixth disappearance. No one even reported

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the first five. But the sixth young woman was living with a roommate who notified the Metropolitan Police that she'd gone missing. Scotland Yard was called in, but then a seventh woman disappeared after vanishing from that tiger's cage. Dr. Merlin—his real name is Burt Haggis—was questioned and denied any knowledge of their whereabouts. It was part of the act, he assured us. Since the young women vanish from the cage, he did not want them reappearing on stage at the next performance. To maintain the air of mystery, he claimed to pay them a hundred-pound bonus to leave London."

"Perhaps it's true," Madge murmured, already thinking about where she could go if Merlin offered her that much money.

"If it is, we've been unable to trace a single one of them. When I questioned him I requested a list of all the women he'd used in the tiger illusion. We've checked back to the towns and villages where they grew up and even talked to family members where there were any. Not one of the girls has been seen since they came to London and joined Merlin's act. We've checked every body pulled from the Thames and even done some extra-legal digging in the vicinity of Merlin's country home. There's not a clue. The women have simply vanished. I don't want that to happen to you."

"It won't," she insisted. "Come on New Year's Eve and I'll prove it to you after the show."

The inspector sighed. "Miss Keene, last summer I called on your predecessor, a girl named Mary Regan, and told her what I'm telling you. Her attitude was much the same as yours. After the performance no one ever saw her again."

"You'll see me," Madge promised, finishing her tea.

In truth, the conversation with the Scotland Yard inspector disturbed her more than she was willing to admit. After leaving him, she did not return immediately to her apartment. Instead she walked along the Thames Embankment, opposite the Houses of Parliament, which had been lit by electricity for more than two years now. Often in the evening people still came to marvel at the large light globes on the decorative cast-iron posts some fifteen feet tall. The bright Embankment lights made it a safe place to walk in a city that still remembered the outrages of Jack the Ripper. The very thought of those crimes made her momentarily doubt her ability to protect herself. Then she remembered she'd be seeing her friend Gregory at a Boxing Day party. Perhaps she could prevail on him to attend Dr. Merlin's performance.

The party the following Wednesday was full of young people. Some were shop girls pleased that the Christmas buying season was over for another year. Others were would-be actors and actresses like herself, talking about the latest Gilbert and Sulli-

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van revival at the Savoy. *Patience* had been substituted for a new comic opera by the collaborators when it became clear that Arthur Sullivan was mortally ill and unable to complete his final work. Sullivan had died in late November, just two weeks after the successful revival of *Patience.*

"I like working at the Savoy," one of the girls told her. She was in the opera's Chorus of Rapturous Maidens. "It's a lovely theater. They've had electricity since it opened in eighteen eighty-one with the original production of *Patience.* Most people in London saw their first lightbulb at the Savoy. Mr. D'Oyly Carte even broke a lighted bulb to show people how safe they were." But Madge knew from her mother's stories that a few busy London intersections had seen electric lights as early as the Savoy.

Madge's friend Gregory appeared then, making his way through the guests to her side. "I'm glad you're here," he said. "I wanted to tell you I have a ship. I sail on New Year's Eve."

Her heart sank. "I was going to invite you to the magic show I'm in."

"Sorry, babe."

She glanced around the room. "You're not going off to those awful brothels in Brussels again, are you? The ones with the young girls?"

He laughed at that. "No, no, those were for my youth. I've given up loose women and pub fighting."

"Is there someplace we can talk?" she asked nervously.

"In here," he said, leading her to the kitchen. "What is it?"

She poured out the story of the job and the conversation with Inspector Snell. "Do you believe that story?" he asked when she'd finished.

"Well, no. But if you were still going to be in London—"

He fished an oddly shaped piece of metal out of his pocket and handed it to her. "Take this. Use it if you have to."

"What is it?" she asked, examining the oblong shape that seemed to have four fingerholes in it.

"In America we call them brass knuckles. You slip them on like this and swing hard."

"God! I could never do that!"

"You could if your life depended on it. Consider it a gift."

"All right," she finally agreed. "Thank you."

She wondered how she was going to hide his gift beneath her brief costume.

On the following day Madge took the tube to the dress rehearsal. From backstage she watched Merlin perform a dozen dazzling illusions wearing formal clothes and a black opera cape with red lining. Then, as the time neared for the final scene, Jamel transferred the tiger to the cage she'd be using, hiding it behind the

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false wall. He seemed to sense her nervousness and walked over to her. "Don't worry, it'll all go well."

She smiled nervously. "I hope so."

And of course it did all go well. If anything was going to happen, it wouldn't be until the real performance next Monday night. She exited the cage with perfect timing and when Jamel pushed the staircase off stage she was hidden inside it.

"You did very well," he told her after the rehearsal was over.

"Thanks. I was a bit worried."

"No need. Susie is like a big kitten."

Merlin joined them, looking pleased with himself. "If it goes that well on Monday night we'll have the audience eating out of our hand."

After he'd gone, Madge casually asked Jamel, "What happened to the girl who had this job ahead of me?"

He looked up from a little English-Flemish dictionary he'd been leafing through and smiled. "She retired from the business. Merlin was lucky to find you. She wasn't nearly so attractive."

"Someone told me that Merlin's assistants are never seen again after they appear in the Vanishing Lady illusion. They said he pays them to leave town."

The young man chuckled at that. "He likes to keep up the fiction that they vanish from the earth and are never seen again. It's just good showmanship. I've been with him since 'ninety-seven and I know he treats his employees well. He has occasional reunions with all the girls. You'll get to meet them someday."

"But where—?"

"All in good time," Jamel told her.

Inspector Snell came by Madge's flat early on New Year's Eve. He sat down opposite her, looking solemn, and said, "Miss Keene, I must urge you once more not to go through with tonight's performance. I will be in the theatre with some of my men, but I cannot guarantee your safety in view of what has happened in the past. We are at our wit's end to explain these disappearances."

"I'll be all right," she assured him. "I have to go through with it."

The special New Year's Eve show in honor of the twentieth century was scheduled to begin at ten o'clock and Merlin had instructed her to arrive an hour early. Feeling like a real actress, she peered out through the curtains. A few people were already in their seats for the performance. She went over to Susie's cage and reached through the bars to pet the tiger. She was a gentle creature. They were right about that.

"Are you ready?" Merlin asked, bustling in through the stage door as he removed his greatcoat. "Where's your costume?"

"I'll change in a minute." She hesitated, then said, "Someone

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told me you pay a bonus to the Vanishing Girl so she stays vanished after the performance."

He waved her away with his hand. "Jamel must have told you. He handles all that."

"I thought I was getting a permanent job."

"My dear, in this illusion you are a symbol of the dying century."

"Then is the tiger a symbol of the twentieth century?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? Hurry and change into your costume now."

"Will Queen Victoria be at tonight's performance?"

"The queen is too ill to attend. Some think she will pass away with the century." He turned and walked quickly away, anxious to prepare for the performance.

In her dingy dressing room, Madge slipped into the spangled tights, carefully cutting a hole near her waist. A mass of spangles hid the opening from view but it was large enough for her purpose. She used the costume's belt to hold the cool metal in place against her side.

Dr. Merlin's performance began just after ten o'clock, with an intermission at eleven. Madge was on stage, mainly for decorative purposes, during some of the other illusions. She carried the linking rings out to him and brought him a small stand and tray for the fireworks effect. The audience cheered each time she appeared. They knew from the poster out front that she would vanish from the cage in the show's grand finale.

Following a twenty-minute intermission, Merlin returned to the stage in a dazzling display of flash powder and smoke. Behind the curtains Jamel and Madge worked with the other stagehands to ensure that everything ran smoothly. During the floating-scarf illusion, Jamel controlled a black fishing line that passed through an overhead eyelet and gave the impression that the scarf floated free. Merlin controlled a second line to add variety to the scarf's movements.

Finally, as midnight approached, the tension grew. Merlin appeared on stage with one of his assistants, undraping the cage on its wheeled platform. Susie the tiger was already in place behind the false back, but could not be seen by the audience. Madge peeked out from the wings and saw Inspector Snell over at the far side of the theater, leaning forward in his seat. He held a pair of opera glasses to his eyes, studying the stage.

Merlin strode purposefully to the side of the stage, holding out his hand for Madge. Then he led her forward to the portable steps, rolled into position by Jamel. She went up the steps, paused at the top for a final unrehearsed wave to the audience, and entered the cage. Merlin immediately dropped the curtain around it. Exactly as she'd rehearsed it, Madge opened the trap door in the floor and

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dropped through, pulling the false wall down behind her and releasing the tiger into the cage. Then, moving in a single fluid motion, she went through the door into the compartment beneath the steps. Just as she closed the door behind her she felt Jamel start to roll the steps offstage. The audience, eyes fixed on the covered cage, hardly noticed.

She heard the gasps and applause as the cage was uncovered and the tiger revealed in her stead. Merlin would be rolling the cage to the front of the stage now, showing there was no trickery, no mirrors, no place where she could be hidden. She heard him address the audience. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the twentieth century!"

The little door beneath the back of the staircase opened and Jamel reached a hand in to help her out. In that instant she was a child again, at the municipal hospital having her tonsils removed. With the suddenness of a lightning bolt she saw her future before her and reached through the opening in her costume.

Applause still filled the house as Inspector Snell and his men burst through the stage door. He took one look at Madge, and the unconscious George Jamel at her feet, and asked, "What happened?"

"He tried to chloroform me. When I recognized the odor I hit him with a pair of brass knuckles."

"My God!"

"He wasn't paying the girls to leave London, as Merlin thought. He was kidnapping them and selling them to one of those brothels in Brussels."

"White slavery," the inspector muttered. "Is Merlin involved too?"

"I don't believe so. You said the girls have been disappearing for the past three years, and Jamel told me he joined the show in 'ninety-seven. Apparently there was no trouble till he came on the scene. I think Jamel chloroformed the girls and left them under the stairway till the theater closed. Then he returned and took them away."

"How do you know they're in Brussels?"

"A guess. Jamel was studying an English-Flemish dictionary the other day, and I know from a friend that brothels in Brussels specialize in attractive young girls. You should find confirmation among his papers."

"You're quite a lady," Snell said with admiration. From the audience they could hear another burst of applause. "Shouldn't you be out there taking a bow?"

"That's a great idea."

Madge strode purposefully onto the stage as the applause grew, and Merlin turned to her. His surprise lasted only an instant. Then he grasped her hand and they bowed together to the audience. O

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The Third Manny
BY TERENCE FAHERTY

The Bluebird
BY ALISON WHITE

Manhunt
BY J.W. WHITEHEAD

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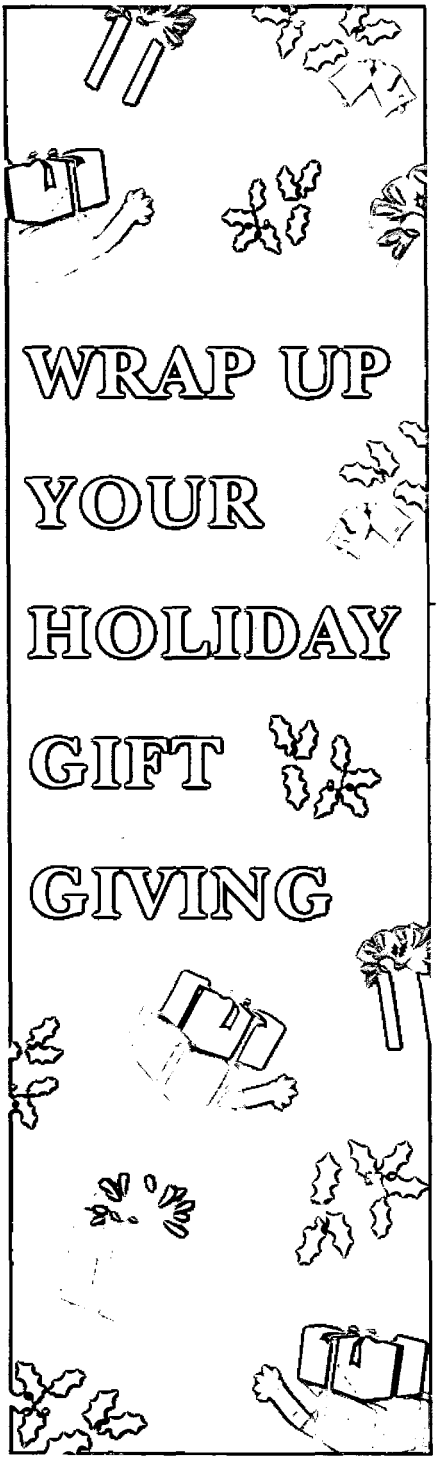

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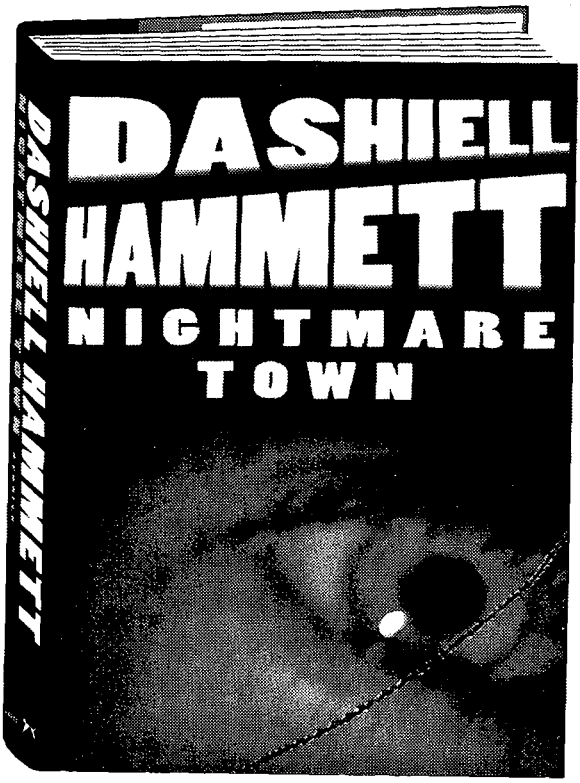

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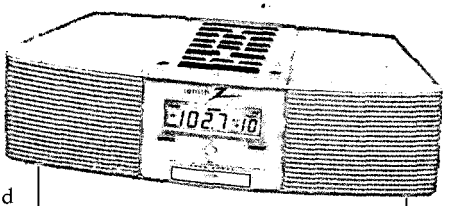

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